

**BEYOND THE PRECEPTS TO A FULL EXPRESSION OF JOY
AND HUMAN REVOLUTION
A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE ON NICHIREN DAISHONIN'S BUDDHISM AND
THE PRACTICE OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM**

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Buddhism has its origins with Shakyamuni (Gautama) Buddha, a prince in India who enjoyed a life of wealth and luxury. Buddhist tradition in China and Japan has him living between 1049 B.C.E. and 949 B.C.E. Upon the realization that every human being is confronted with the inescapable problems of birth, old age, sickness and death, he renounced his lifestyle in order to find answers to these problems. He spent a considerable amount of time in practices of self-denial, much like the ascetics of his day.

Shakyamuni returned to a more moderate way of living after he found ascetic practices to be useless and engaged in deep meditation until he reached enlightenment. He taught what he had realized for fifty years with the desire to lead all people to the enlightenment he had achieved.

Shakyamuni had to prepare his disciples before he could reveal the truth of life because it was much too difficult for the average person to comprehend. People were caught up in the belief that material possessions and immediate pleasures provided the happiness they were seeking. Shakyamuni taught that living a life filled with pain, only to die, be reborn and repeat that process was a life lived in vain. The only logical way to escape from these sufferings was to eliminate desire by annihilating the body. People were taught to suppress desires. This was later known as Hinayana Buddhism.

As understanding among his disciples grew, Shakyamuni discouraged them from seeking nothingness. He taught that there was another happy world where one could be reborn without eliminating desires. These teachings were part of the provisional doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism.

When Shakyamuni later expounded the Lotus Sutra, a change took place. He encouraged his disciples to discover the Law within their lives instead of simply following precepts. If they did that, he taught, they would find that even the turbulent land where they lived would become peaceful.

After Shakyamuni's death, many disciples propagated Hinayana Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism was propagated as being able to save more people from unhappiness. Gradually, Shakyamuni's Buddhism lost its glory in India. Brahmanism regained the influence it had previously lost and prospered as Hinduism. Buddhism was still propagated in various forms in the neighboring countries of India. Hinayana Buddhism took a southern route to countries like Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Mahayana Buddhism flowed to northwest India, central Asia, China, Korea and Japan. Another stream of Buddhism went into Tibet and mingled with a native Bon teaching and formed Lamaism.

During the Han Dynasty of China, Confucianism was the foundation of political ideas, but Buddhism came to be believed among aristocrats and intellectuals. Many sutras were translated into Chinese, which attracted people's attention. As a result, Buddhism flourished. T'ien-t'ai taught three major works and, based on the Lotus Sutra, completed the doctrine that became the theoretical basis for Nichiren Daishonin to inscribe the Gohonzon.

The T'ien-t'ai sect gradually lost followers as other sects of Buddhism gained strength. Miao-lo re-established the T'ien-t'ai sect and his disciples preached the true teaching of the sect to Japanese scholars.

Buddhism was officially introduced to Japan in 552 when King Seimei of Kudara, ancient Korea, presented the Japanese government with a Buddhist idol and scriptures. This occurred 1,400 years after Shakyamuni's death.

Nichiren Daishonin was born in 1222 in the village of Kominato in Chiba prefecture. As he grew older, he thought it was strange that so many Buddhist sects were in conflict with one another while they all preached Shakyamuni's teachings. He made up his mind to establish a correct Buddhism. He prepared himself for the priesthood and began studying Buddhism. At the age of 32, the Daishonin found that the essence of Buddhism was in the Lotus Sutra.

Shakyamuni predicted that in the future, a specific time called the Latter Day of the Law, the Law would be revealed and the Lotus Sutra widely propagated. Nichiren Daishonin's mission was to reveal the Law hidden in the depths of the Lotus Sutra as Nam-myohorenge-kyo and inscribe the Gohonzon for the happiness of all humankind.

In preparing to write this article, I used several books on Tibetan Buddhism. I found myself reading them with increased insight after thirteen years of practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. All those nights studying the teachings of the Daishonin, all the sessions with seniors in faith, all the district discussion meetings and absorbing SGI-USA publications and President Daisaku Ikeda's writings proved invaluable in examining the practices and philosophy of Tibetan Buddhism. I am neither a professional scholar nor a student of comparative religions. Rather than a refutation of Tibetan Buddhism, this article is a personal perspective on this esoteric form offering numerous empowerments (initiations) and stages of practice requiring rigorous self-analysis and devotion to a teacher or guru.

In what seems to be a relatively short period of time, Buddhism in the West has become identified with the smiling, amiable monks and lamas (priests) of the various schools of Tibetan Buddhism. A prominent book and music chain serves as the official bookseller for the Dalai Lama's latest lecture tour, "The Illuminated Path — 2000." Stirred by the plight of the Tibetans, whose country has been under the domination of China since 1947, people have donated funds to the Tibetan Dalai Lama's government in exile in Dharamsala, North India for aid to refugees and for the construction of meditation centers and temples worldwide.

For many, the image of Buddhism in America is clad in burgundy and gold robes, wrapped in a mantle of elaborate mystery that is seldom examined or questioned. Few take the time to deeply consider the effectiveness of this highly ornate and ritualistic form of Buddhism in terms of their own individual quests for happiness. It appears that the sincere countenance and insights of the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, and those of his followers from Tibet and in the West strike a deep chord in interested Americans: the desire for true happiness and how to live an enlightened life.

The tenets, monastic trappings and exotic nature of Tibetan Buddhism suggest that these monks and lamas somehow embody something rare — only obtainable through the use of deep, extended practices well beyond our everyday human existence. For most

Americans, a monastic lifestyle or one that includes a periodic religious retreat may be impossible. Just how accessible are the peace, happiness and the dynamic joy of an enlightened life to those drawn to the precepts and exterior appearance of Tibetan Buddhism? As members of SGI-USA, what might our attitude and perspective be when engaging in dialogue with our friends and acquaintances when asked how the Daishonin's Buddhism differs from the Tibetan schools of Buddhism?

My Life and Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan Buddhism touched my own life over twenty years ago when, as a lay follower, I studied in a small Tibetan temple in Hawaii. Like many others, I was drawn to the peace emanating from the temple grounds and the charming and happy ways of the monks, *geshes* (teachers) and lamas that lived and lectured there. It was a simple life of service and meditation set apart from the rest of the world. I enjoyed the students who, like myself, sought something deeper and more meaningful. I sincerely hoped to find in the practice something that would resonate for me and would help me with the challenges of my life as a single mother. I cooked for many retreats and teaching sessions, slept in the little room right next to the altar and endeavored to learn the practices of Tibetan Buddhism.

My only child was born three days after the Dalai Lama made his historic visit to Hawaii to bless our small temple. Reflecting on that time, I recall how we were all swept up in preparations, working for days to make things perfect. The evening that he arrived, a long motorcade of cars made its way to the temple. Since the Dalai Lama is considered a head of state, the Secret Service arrived first followed by the Dalai Lama's limousine. As he stepped out onto the red carpet, the people gathered there and repeatedly prostrated themselves at his feet. They were worshipping him as "a divine incarnation," a manifestation of Avalokites-vara, the Buddha of Compassion. Although I did not know why, the waves of prostration and the two days of ceremony and teachings that constituted his visit made me feel confused and uncomfortable.

In the following weeks, my young son received a Tibetan name from the chief lama of the temple and I tried to continue with my studies. I found myself restless with the multitude of teachings and the sheer magnitude of the steps to enlightenment. I was exasperated and felt like everything I was doing had nothing to do with my happiness or Buddhahood. The end came for me when, in the depths of a personal sorrow, I was told in a private session with a highly respected lama that I should no longer be concerned with such a minor and transient suffering in light of the impermanence of this existence. I was told to not think about it and to be happy and was offered a cookie from his tea tray. I was stunned. I felt I had been treated like a child. I struggled to understand. Although I grasped what he said intellectually, his answer did not touch my heart—it did not help my life.

How Many Lifetimes Must it Take?

Many years after Shakyamuni Buddha's death, the Buddhist monk scholars who crossed the Hindu Kush range in what is now Afghanistan, or chanced the dangerous seas to spread the Buddha's teachings into China and the rest of Asia, did not risk the remote Himalayan Range. They might not have known of Tibet's existence, a region embraced by a formidable barrier of mountains so high, it has been called "the roof of the world." The Lotus Sutra was translated into Chinese by the Indian scholar and teacher Kumarajiva in 406 CE, a full three centuries prior to the first appearance of Buddhist teachings in the eighth century in Tibet.

Early Tibetan Buddhist scholars had no knowledge of the landmark interpretations of the Lotus Sutra set forth by the eminent Chinese Buddhist sage and scholar, T'ien-t'ai (or Chih-i). In 594 CE, he expounded *Great Concentration and Insight*, which revealed the mutually inclusive relationship of a single moment of life and all phenomena, what T'ien-t'ai termed "three thousand realms in a single moment of life." It was a prevalent Chinese Buddhist belief during that age that, depending upon one's karma, an individual could occupy only one state in a lifetime. This mutually exclusive view made the attainment of enlightenment a long and arduous passage requiring many lifetimes of practice.

The mutually inclusive function revealed by T'ien-T'ai opened the door to enlightenment in one lifetime as an individual was capable of moving back and forth any number of times from one realm to another. Thus, one could reach Buddhahood without undergoing a series of rebirths. At the same time, attaining Buddhahood was not a static state or permanent condition. (*Faith Into Action*, p. 233). The Daishonin said of the Lotus Sutra: "It explains that the entity of our life which manifests either good or evil at each moment, is in fact the entity of the Mystic Law...That is why the sutra states, 'After I have passed into extinction, [one] should accept and uphold this sutra. Such a person assuredly and without a doubt will attain the Buddha way.'" ("On Attaining Buddhahood," *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 4)

This most important teaching of the Buddha did not reach Tibet in the early years of Buddhist propagation there. After its introduction, the Lotus Sutra was not regarded as singularly important in Tibet. By the time it was translated into the Tibetan language, earlier forms of Buddhism had already established themselves in the lives of the Tibetan people.

Early Buddhism in Tibet absorbed much of the old shamanistic, indigenous religion known as Bon. This was similar to the way early Christianity absorbed the customs and practices of the ancient nature or pagan cults of Europe. To this day, one can see the old religion in Tibetan demon mask dances and in the ancient arts and practices of divination, astrology and the consulting of oracles. As power shifted over the centuries, the warlords and aristocracy of Tibet were absorbed into the monastic class as well. In the thirteenth century (coinciding with the Daishonin's lifetime), the political title of "Dalai Lama" which means "Ocean of Wisdom" was bestowed on a high abbot of Tibet by Chinese emperor Kublai Khan, making him Regent of Tibet. Leadership succession in Tibet, no longer a political process of building dynasties, was determined by the recognition of successive incarnations of Avalokitesvara, thereby securing the only known form of monastic governance in Buddhist history.

Reliance Upon the Mentor ~ The Worship of the Guru

Because of its emphasis on the guidance of a qualified instructor, lama or mentor, Tibetan Buddhism was called "lamaism" for centuries in Asia. In the eleventh century, the Indian teacher Atisha Dipamkara Shrijnana arrived in Tibet. A grand personage of 60, the Tibetans regarded him as a Buddha in human form and his impact upon the Tibetan form of Buddhism was very deep. He was invited to Tibet to use his encyclopedic knowledge of Buddhist literature to assist monasteries there in recovering from a period of suppression, confusion and disorganization. Atisha proclaimed that the instruction of the mentor was more important than knowledge of the scriptures since the guru, lama, master or spiritual mentor is the key element that makes them practicable. This principle of "the priority of the mentor" is the foundation of Tibetan Buddhism

A proponent of the Tantric school, considered to be the Supreme Vehicle for enlightenment, Atisha reestablished this ritualistic path that could not be negotiated without successive initiations at the hands of a living teacher. For a Tibetan Buddhist, there is no quicker path to enlightenment than embracing the Tantric teachings with a lama. Absolute surrender and trust is required. A contemporary Tibetan teacher, Kalu Rinpoche, once said: “If you believe your guru is enlightened—he is.” (*Foundations of Tibetan Buddhism*, 79)

The mentor-disciple relationship in the Daishonin’s Buddhism is one of mutual trust in the Law where our mentor, President Ikeda, presents a model from which to learn, but holds no initiatory status or special powers. Our mentor is not the focus of our devotion or worship. What we call “seniors in faith” are lay organization leaders who encourage the members in their practice. Strengthening our faith together as equal members, we do not rely upon persons who would serve as gatekeepers to our enlightenment.

Nichiren Daishonin’s teachings and writings are a condensation of Shakyamuni Buddha’s 80,000 sutras. Immediately before his passing, Shakyamuni strictly admonished his disciples to rely on the Law and themselves. He forbade reliance upon people, gods and deities, including the worship of Shakyamuni himself. The practice of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism clearly emphasizes our reliance upon the Mystic Law of cause and effect and our chanting of Nam-myoho-rence-kyo. President Ikeda has written: “It should be pointed out that the ‘Law,’ not the ‘person’ is to be regarded as the proper standard in all things. Putting the person first gives you an uncertain standard; it is to let that person’s mind become your master. In contrast, if you establish the Law as your standard, you will become the master of your mind.” (*Faith Into Action*, 233)

Tibetan Buddhist Practice ~"A Rehearsal for Enlightenment"

Books written by the Dalai Lama cover many Buddhist precepts in detail in addition to certain meditations that are said to help engender states of compassion and other humanistic traits. Considered to be rules of conduct, the Latin root of “precept” indicates something that must be grasped prior to being seen. Precepts are thought to precede deeper knowledge. Few would deny that it is important to treat one another with kindness, to look within for the sources of happiness and suffering and to curb negative acts in order to avoid more suffering. All religions have precepts of some kind. Even though precepts may be helpful or have some effect in society, if people have no way to change their deeply rooted karmic tendencies, following precepts and engaging in critical self-analysis can only be of limited help.

How does one come to embody the essence of the precepts, living them fully from the foundation of self-revelation, moving beyond precepts and self-analysis to the full expression of joy and life force? As followers of Nichiren Daishonin, we see the way to happiness, human revolution and fulfillment as something readily accessible and easily communicated to all. In my experience, the actual hands-on practice of Tibetan Buddhism was one that was ultimately frustrating and did not result in noticeable change in my life.

The path to enlightenment in Tibetan Buddhism requires a solid foundation in the teachings, sutras, renunciation, elimination of worldly desires, cultivation of Bodhicitta (the mind of compassion) and a full understanding of emptiness. There are several means toward this end. Deity yoga is practiced to “link” oneself to the form of the Buddha or teacher using deep psychological training and active visualization of one’s guru. The Dalai Lama has called visualization of the Buddha, deities and bodhisattvas a rehearsal for

Buddhahood. Mudras (hand gestures) are utilized as well as chanting mantras from numerous sutras with the belief that they invoke the Buddha within. The offering of prostrations is to engender humility by lowering one's body and face to the ground or floor. Qualified teachers who offer vows and prayers bestow empowerments. In brief, this constitutes the preliminary practice for lay believers who are encouraged through observing precepts to accumulate merit through good deeds in hopes for a fortunate rebirth. For most, the goal of enlightenment is considered only for those with the stamina, endurance and good fortune to complete its rigorous requirements.

Nichiren Daishonin considered all pre-Lotus Sutra teachings as partial truths. Shakyamuni himself stated that the whole truth is revealed in the Lotus Sutra. Further, based on T'ien-t'ai's writings, the Daishonin clarified the use of the title of the Lotus Sutra, Myoho-enge-kyo, as the correct mantra or phrase for his followers to use. Later he inscribed the "object for observing one's mind," the Gohonzon, which serves as an exterior embodiment of the principle of "three-thousand realms in a single life moment." By chanting to the Gohonzon, we are covering all the practices of the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings. The Daishonin states in "On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime":

No expedient or provisional teaching leads to enlightenment, and without the direct path to enlightenment, you cannot attain Buddhahood, even if you practice lifetime after lifetime for countless kalpas. You must never think that any of the eighty-thousand sacred teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha's lifetime or any of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas of the ten directions and three existences are outside of yourself. Your practice of the Buddhist teachings will not relieve you of the sufferings of birth and death unless you perceive the true nature of your life. If you seek enlightenment outside yourself, then your performing even ten-thousand practices and ten-thousand good deeds will be in vain. It is like the case of a poor man who spends night and day counting his neighbor's wealth but gains not even half a coin. Unless one perceives the nature of one's life...one's practice will become an endless painful austerity." (WND, 3-4)

Buddhahood — a Final Destination or a Dynamic Continuing Unfoldment?

In Tibetan Buddhism, a Buddha is one who has discovered the unity of one's awareness with the omnipresent awareness of all beings and things. A Buddha experiences the reality of absolute voidness and integrates this experience and then manifests educational events that help others to see through their delusions thereby teaching them the way of freedom through the exact intuition of the nature of all things. (*Essential Tibetan Buddhism*, p. 11) This state, as explained previously, is only achieved through a complex system requiring years of practice with a qualified teacher. Essentially, in Tibetan Buddhist thought, once someone has attained enlightenment there is no more to learn. That person has become omniscient—or all knowing.

President Ikeda offers his insights into Buddhahood when he states:

What does attaining Buddhahood mean for us? It does not mean that one day we suddenly turn into a Buddha or become magically enlightened. In a sense, attaining Buddhahood means that we have securely entered the path, or orbit, of Buddhahood. Rather than a final, static destination at which we arrive and remain, achieving enlightenment means firmly establishing the faith needed to keep advancing along the path of absolute happiness limitlessly, endlessly. (*Faith Into Action*, 95)

One of the things that drew me to the practice of the Daishonin's Buddhism was the refreshing idea that I could enjoy the great happiness and capabilities of Buddhahood in this lifetime. It filled my very being with renewed hope. What I have observed about my own life and the lives of other members is that this hope manifests itself as courage, confidence and the desire to push forward with the practice because of the bright light of actual proof. Experiencing the fruits of practice, I was no longer afraid of any obstacle in my environment.

No matter what door we walked through to enter the practice, regardless of the desires that surged within us, we have used our needs, our dreams, our wishes and challenges to continue moving toward an enlightened life of happiness, effectiveness and compassion for others. I was drawn to the Daishonin's Buddhism because it held more than the hope of happiness—it showed me a clear, understandable path to it.

Oh? Are You A Tibetan Buddhist?

When someone becomes aware that I'm a Buddhist, they will ask me if I'm a Tibetan Buddhist. This has become a personal survey of mine and almost without exception, that question keeps coming up early in conversations. This question points to the continued high profile of Tibetan Buddhism on America's spiritual landscape as well as the desire to know more about Buddhism in general.

I don't mind the question because it gives me the opportunity to explain just what kind of Buddhist I am. I tell them I am a follower of the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin, a thirteenth-century Buddhist sage and teacher who based his teachings on the Lotus Sutra. When Shakyamuni Buddha offered the Lotus Sutra to his disciples he said to put aside all of the teachings that he had taught before, because having raised them to an appropriate level of understanding, he was going to teach them the direct path to enlightenment. Today, this direct path is the invocation of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo that allows us to open the palace of enlightenment as we are.

We follow the Mystic Law of cause and effect and chant before a scroll called the Gohonzon, the manifestation of the Daishonin's enlightenment, and a representation of our own innate Buddha nature. Through our practice, we awaken the Buddha nature that dwells within us and begin to live a life of enlightened wisdom using all obstacles as stepping-stones to happiness. Chanting changes a person's karma from the inside out. We worship no guru, teacher, priest or statue. This is a direct and simple practice, one that is accessible to all people, regardless of educational or spiritual attainments, gender or race. We do not have to master the Buddhist life philosophy in the beginning but need only to chant to discover actual proof in our lives. This Buddhism goes beyond precepts. Faith enables us to carry on the heritage of the Law. We freely pass it to another without complex initiations or special powers. Faith is what really matters in the Daishonin's Buddhism.

Tibetan Buddhist precepts and the complexity of the practice necessitates a considerable gap between where people actually are in the midst of life's challenges and the Buddha they might become one day. This can serve as a hindrance to further practice. We can use dialogue as an opportunity to freely explain to people how our Buddhism differs. We have to be able to discuss these matters knowledgeably. Family members, friends and acquaintances deserve thoughtful perspectives on Buddhism and how it can impact their lives directly. We should heed the Daishonin's advice to Sammi-bo, who delivered lectures to the aristocracy in Kyoto, that we should never "be impolite or abusive, or display a

conceited attitude. Such conduct would be disgraceful. Order your thoughts, words and deeds carefully and be prudent” (“The Teaching, Practice and Proof,” WND, 483).

There Is No Buddha Existing Apart From The People

As members of SGI-USA and practitioners of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, our hearts should always be with the people. Seeing their potential and sharing our lives with them is the deepest sincerity. There is no greater joy than seeing another person become truly happy and confidently moving forward in life. In this life-to-life manner — knowing that each of us can attain Buddhahood in this lifetime — we are planting seeds that will grow and blossom for thousands of years. Offering a simple, accessible practice, one that results in a direct experience of benefit and change in a person’s life — for us, this is the Buddha’s work. The Daishonin states in “The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind,” “Shakyamuni’s practices and the virtues he consequently attained are all contained within the five characters of myoho-renge-kyo. If we believe in these five characters, we will naturally be granted the same benefits he was” (WND, 365).

In “Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra,” President Ikeda tells us: “Majestic Buddhas are but illusions that have nothing to do with reality. The only actual Buddhas are ordinary people who each moment bring forth the eternal life force of time without beginning. There is no Buddha existing apart from the people. A Buddha set above the people is an expedient means. Therefore, the correct way is to live with dignity as a human being and to continue along the supreme path in life; to do so is to be a Buddha each day experiencing eternity.”

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