

**NICHIREN BUDDHISM AND EMPOWERMENT**  
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***Shakyamuni's enlightenment may be considered a seminal event, a critical moment in Eastern psychology. This awakening started with insight into his own unconscious and expanded to illuminate a vast psychic cosmos. His exploration of his inner world, this inner cosmos, moved beyond the individual level, deepening eventually to include all humankind. He continued to explore the bounds of selfhood, from the commonality of all living things, to those realms where the self is fused with the Earth, the solar system and the entire universe.***

Nichiren is the thirteenth-century Japanese Buddhist teacher whose teachings inspire the activities of the SGI. In this paper I would like to explore areas of contact between Nichiren Buddhism and the idea of self-empowerment.

Nichiren himself was thoroughly versed in the intellectual history of Buddhism. His understanding was rooted in the sutras recording the teachings of Shakyamuni, and drew from the theories and exegeses of the Indian scholars Nagarjuna<sup>1</sup> (c. 2–3 century C.E.), Vasubandhu<sup>2</sup> (5th-century C.E.), the Chinese Buddhist T'ien-t'ai School,<sup>3</sup> and Japan's Saicho<sup>4</sup> (8th-century C.E.). Thus, in discussing empowerment, I will start by exploring points of contact between modern Western psychology and the "eight consciousness" theories developed by Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu, and adopted and developed by T'ien-t'ai and Nichiren.

It was the British historian Arnold Toynbee who said that the two great discoveries of this century were the theory of relativity in the realm of physics and the work of uncovering the unconscious in the realm of psychology. He further remarked that the discovery of the unconscious revealed that each individual is in fact a cosmos, a universe.

Credit for the discovery of the unconscious in Western psychology goes to Freud, whose work was followed by Adler,<sup>5</sup> Jung<sup>6</sup>, Maslow<sup>7</sup> and others, who have dramatically extended our exploration of the psychic cosmos.

In the East some 2,500 years ago, Shakyamuni, widely known as the Buddha, creatively adapted and recast the ancient philosophy of the Upanishads<sup>8</sup> as he developed his own philosophy. His awakening as he meditated beneath the bodhi tree may be considered a seminal event, a critical moment in Eastern psychology. This awakening started with insights into his own unconscious and expanded to illuminate a vast psychic cosmos.

His exploration of his inner world, this inner cosmos, moved beyond the individual level, deepening eventually to include all humankind. He continued to explore the bounds of selfhood, from the commonality of all living things, to those depth realms where the self is fused with the Earth, the solar system and the entire universe. He finally awakened to the fundamental wisdom of life, the life of the universe itself, which gives rise to all phenomena as they evolve in harmonious unity with the psychic cosmos.

Later practitioners would refer to the cosmic life force to which Shakyamuni awakened as the Buddha nature. They would explore means and methods of practice by which all people can manifest the vast energy, dignity and wisdom of this life state; methods, in other words, of self-empowerment.

## A Three-Layered Structure of Consciousness

Here I would like to give a brief outline of the eight consciousness teaching that forms an important basis of Buddhist psychology.

The word that is translated as consciousness is the Sanskrit *viññāna*, which indicates a wide range of activities, including sensation, cognition and conscious thought. *Viññāna* can be thought of referring to the entire psychic cosmos.

According to the Yogacara School,<sup>9</sup> *viññāna* comprises three layers: 1) the five senses and waking consciousness; 2) the *mano* consciousness; and 3) the *alaya* consciousness, with the *alaya* being regarded as the core, or most fundamental site of psychological activity. In other words, the content of the *alaya* layer makes itself known and becomes manifest in the activities of the *mano* layer, as well as in the five senses and the waking consciousness. Conversely, the activities of the more superficial layers are inscribed in the depths of the *alaya* consciousness. There is thus a constant and intimate interaction between the different layers of consciousness.

It should also be clarified at this point that the *alaya* consciousness should not simply be understood in an ontological sense, as existing, but as embracing a cognitive and even an ethical dimension.

The *mano* and *alaya* layers of consciousness in many senses correspond to the individual and collective unconscious<sup>10</sup> in Jungian psychology.

I would like first to look at the *mano* consciousness, which is described as emerging from the *alaya* consciousness and being focused in its “attention” on the *alaya* consciousness.

In this sense, the *mano* layer can be understood as the seat of the most basic consciousness of self. The Sanskrit verb from which this derives is *manas*, meaning “to think” or “to consider.” Thus the *mano* consciousness is always thinking about, considering, and in fact reifying the *alaya* consciousness of the individual, which it perceives as something unique and isolated from other things. It is from this strong attachment, or clinging, to a reified *alaya* consciousness that *mano* consciousness generates the sense of a limited, isolated self referred to in Buddhism as the lesser self.

When the *mano* consciousness functions in this manner it gives rise to a series of powerful delusions that manifest in the other, more immediate layers of perception and consciousness as attachment to and pride in this proscribed sense of selfhood. The delusion that the reified *alaya* conscious is one’s true self is identified with fundamental ignorance, a turning away from the truth of the interconnectedness of all beings. It is this sense of one’s self as separate and isolated from others that gives rise to discrimination against others, to destructive arrogance and acquisitiveness.

The lesser self is deeply insecure, and vacillates between feelings of superiority and inferiority with regard to others; in the pursuit of its own fulfillment, the lesser self will unthinkingly harm or wound others. When the *mano* consciousness is filled with these delusions about the nature of the self, they give rise to a whole series of delusions that the early Buddhist took great pains to name, number and classify, but which I will omit here in the interest of time. Suffice it to say that the *mano* consciousness functions to create a strong sense of disjunction between self and others and to generate discriminatory attitudes toward those we experience as “other.”

### Characteristics of the Alaya Consciousness.

In the *Trimsika-vijnapti*, Vasubandhu ascribes the following characteristics to the *alaya* consciousness. First, it is not obscured by delusion and is morally neutral; that is, it is equally

receptive to the karmic imprint of both negative and positive causes. Next, it is extremely dynamic; its flow is compared to that of a raging torrent. In Sanskrit the word *alaya* means to store, and it is in this consciousness that the latent causes, often described metaphorically as seeds, are retained.

Karma is, of course, a basic concept in Buddhism. It posits that our thoughts, words and deeds (whether conscious or in the unconscious realm of the *mano* layer) invariably exert an influence that is impressed or imprinted into the deepest layers of life, the *alaya* consciousness. When they encounter the right enabling conditions, these latent causes, or karmic seeds, become manifest as the functions of the *mano* or other more superficial layers of consciousness.

These karmic seeds can be either positive or negative. Positive latent causes become manifest in positive psychological functions such as trust, nonviolence, self-control, compassion and wisdom. Negative latent causes become manifest as various forms of delusion and destructive behavior. In this sense, the functioning of the *alaya* consciousness can be understood as prior to that of delusions; it is not stained or influenced by them. It remains neutral and equally receptive to either type of karmic imprinting.

As mentioned, the *alaya* consciousness interacts constantly and intimately with other layers of consciousness such as the *mano* consciousness, waking consciousness and the sensory functions. It is not a separate, independent thing or entity. It is better thought of as a fluid and vitally evolving flow. It is this lack of permanence, this fluidity, which opens the possibility to transforming the content of the *alaya* consciousness, and thus the functioning of the other layers of consciousness.

### **Transforming Consciousness and Gaining Wisdom**

The idea of transforming consciousness and gaining wisdom is central to Buddhist psychology and perhaps represents Buddhism's most direct contribution to the idea of self-empowerment.

The Indian Yogacara School elucidated the eight-layered structure of the consciousness outlined above. It was the T'ien-t'ai and Hua-yen Flower Garland (Jpn *Kegon*) schools in China that uncovered a ninth consciousness, an undefiled *amala* consciousness underlying, supporting and embracing the functioning of the *alaya* consciousness.

Taking up the thread of the nine-consciousness teaching, Nichiren describes different types of wisdom that manifest in each layer of consciousness. The *amala* consciousness manifests the wisdom to understand that we are one with the cosmic life force. This is the fundamental wisdom of the living universe, and it is by manifesting this most fundamental wisdom that we are able to transform the workings of the other layers of consciousness, including that of the *alaya* consciousness, where profound karmic causes reside. This transformation is the objective of Buddhist psychology and of Buddhist practice, including the pursuit of the altruistic bodhisattva way.

Buddhist practice impresses the seeds of positive causes in the *alaya* consciousness. The more and the stronger these causes, the more fully the content of the *alaya* consciousness is transformed. As the *alaya* consciousness is transformed, it shines with the light of a wisdom that can be likened to a great mirror, perfectly reflecting all phenomena in their true aspect. This is the wisdom of interdependence, the wisdom to perceive and understand that, at the most profound level, we are all interconnected and interdependent.

When the *alaya* consciousness is transformed in this manner, it stimulates the arising in the *mano* consciousness of the wisdom to perceive the equality of all things. In other words, the *mano* consciousness no longer functions as the site of a fundamentally discriminatory

consciousness, but can perceive its “own” *alaya* consciousness as equally part of a creatively evolving cosmic life force. In other words, the *mano* consciousness ceases to generate a falsely proscribed sense of “self” in profound ontological conflict with others.

Overcoming the deep-rooted tendency to reify and cling to the *alaya* consciousness enables the individual to overcome feelings of fear and dread of physical death. This is replaced by a profound awareness that the *alaya* consciousness is a flow of life, repeatedly undergoing cycles of life and death, supported and embraced by the fundamental vitality and wisdom inherent in the universe, that is, the *amala*, or ninth, consciousness. Death comes to be understood as the cyclical waning of the ability to support the active functioning of the *mano* consciousness, the waking consciousness and the sensory organs. These functions become latent within the *alaya* consciousness upon death, but the *alaya* consciousness does not undergo extinction when an individual dies, but maintains the continuity of the life-flow over cycles of life and death.

When deep-seated delusions regarding the nature of the self and its existence are overcome, the *mano* consciousness can now function as the site of positive characteristics such as trust, self-control and compassion.

The transformation of the deepest layers of consciousness impacts the functioning of cognition and perception, located in waking consciousness and the sensory apparatus. These become imbued with their own forms of wisdom, including the wisdom to freely control the functions of the senses and to act in a manner that most effectively advances one’s own life and the lives of others.

A person who constantly strives to effect this kind of profound transformation of all layers of consciousness, and who seeks to inspire and aid others in this quest, is referred to as a bodhisattva.

### **The SGI Movement and the Way of the Bodhisattva**

In Nichiren Buddhism, the fundamental practice is that of reciting the mantra Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to the mandala inscribed by Nichiren for the purpose of enabling people to manifest the wisdom of the ninth or *amala* consciousness. In this manner, we seek to transform consciousness and gain wisdom, awaken the Buddha nature that is one with the cosmic life force and to establish a bodhisattva self.

Nichiren identifies four virtues of the bodhisattva as true self, eternity, purity and joy.

The virtue of true self might be understood as the experience of expansive freedom and hope that is rooted in a sense of unity with the life force of the cosmos. Eternity indicates the creativity inherent in the life of the universe that drives constant renewal and rejuvenation; the vitality to surmount any obstacle. Purity is the function of the cosmic life to cleanse the restrictive egotism that stains and distorts the self. Finally, the virtue of joy is the quality of self-realization, a life-state of utter confidence and serenity based on one’s identification with the universal life.

Nichiren asserts that a genuine bodhisattva manifests the entire spectrum of these four virtues. And it is these virtues — true self, eternity, purity and joy — that enable the bodhisattva to transform negative circumstances into the occasion for growth and the creation of value. It is for this reason that the bodhisattva does not avoid or retreat from the difficulties and challenges of life, but rather places her- or himself in their very midst, acknowledging and confronting them head-on.

Nichiren describes the benefit of reciting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo as that of transforming the inevitable sufferings of living — what Buddhism terms the “four sufferings” of birth, aging, illness and death — into the four virtues of true self, eternity, purity and joy. The bodhisattva,

by transforming those experiences that are so often the cause of great suffering into the opportunity for development and advancement, inspires others to pursue a path of “transforming consciousness and gaining wisdom.”

Through active engagement with others, we can continually strengthen and deepen this bodhisattva self, in an endeavor that is not limited to the pursuit of personal happiness, but involves a commitment to the realization of peace, both for humankind and for the entire biosphere.

The work of the Soka Gakkai International to promote a contemporary movement of the Bodhisattva Way is rooted in the efforts of individuals to transform their inner, psychic cosmos. By manifesting wisdom in all layers of consciousness, and encouraging the development of this wisdom in our families, communities and societies, we seek to overcome the delusions that give rise to a host of well-rehearsed personal and social ills: from the sense of disempowerment that plagues so many people, to intra- and inter-societal conflicts, to ecological destruction. While the path of the bodhisattva may represent a gradualist approach, we are confident that it represents a fundamental transformation, with the power to change for the better the lives both of individuals and of all humankind.

1. Nagarjuna: A Mahayana scholar who lived in southern India between 150 and 250 C.E. He wrote many important treatises on a great number of Mahayana sutras and organized the theoretical foundation of Mahayana thought, thus making an inestimable contribution to its development. He is especially known for his systematization of the doctrine of non-substantiality. His treatises include *The Treatise on the Middle Way*, *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, and *The Commentary on the Ten Stages Sutra*.
2. Vasubandhu: A Buddhist scholar in India thought to have lived around the fourth or fifth century C.E. He is known as the author of *The Dharma Analysis Treasury*. He originally studied Hinayana but was later converted to Mahayana by his elder brother Asanga. He wrote numerous treatises designed to clarify the Mahayana teachings.
3. T'ien-t'ai School: Founded in China by T'ien-t'ai, also known as Chih-i, T'ien-t'ai Chih-che, the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai, and the Great Teacher Chih-che. After studying at Mount Ta-su under Nan-yüeh, he became known for his profound lectures on the Lotus Sutra. He refuted the scriptural classifications formulated by the ten major Buddhist schools of his day, and classified all of Shakyamuni's sutras into five periods and eight teachings, demonstrating the supremacy of the Lotus Sutra. His principal works, *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*, *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*, and *Great Concentration and Insight*, were all recorded and compiled by his immediate disciple Chang-an. In *Great Concentration and Insight*, T'ien-t'ai set forth the principle of three thousand realms in a single moment of life.
4. Saicho (767–822 C.E.) — Also known as Dengyo or the Great Teacher Dengyo. The founder of the Tendai school in Japan. In 804 he went to China to study T'ien-t'ai's doctrines. Returning the next year, he founded the Tendai School. The word *Tendai* is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese word T'ien-t'ai. He made efforts to establish a Mahayana ordination center on Mount Hiei despite opposition from the older schools in Nara. Permission was finally granted shortly after his death and his successor Gishin completed the center in 827. In Nichiren Daishonin's writings, Dengyo is also referred to as the Great Teacher Kompon, or the Great Teacher Fundamental.
5. Adler, Alfred (1870–1937) — Austrian psychiatrist who introduced the term *inferiority*

*feeling*, later widely and often inaccurately called inferiority complex.

6. Jung, Carl (1875–1961) — Swiss psychologist who founded analytic psychology. Jung proposed and developed the concepts of the extroverted and introverted personality, archetypes and the collective unconscious.

7. Maslow, Abraham (1908–1970) — U.S. psychologist and philosopher best known for his self-actualization theory of psychology, which argued that the primary goal of psychotherapy should be the integration of the self.

8. Upanishads — Literally, “Sittings Near a Teacher” Ancient Hindu teachings concerned with the ultimate identity of all phenomena, which merely appear to be separate.

9. Yogacara School — Also called Vijñānavada (“Doctrine of Consciousness”), an important idealistic school of Mahayana Buddhism.

10. collective unconscious — A term introduced by psychiatrist Carl Jung to represent a form of the unconscious (that part of the mind containing memories and impulses of which the individual is not aware) common to mankind as a whole and originating in the inherited structure of the brain.

## THE NINE LEVELS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

**The following explanation of the nine consciousnesses discussed in Dr. Kawada’s article is from *The Buddha in Your Mirror*, published by Middleway Press.**

### First Five Consciousnesses

According to the Buddhist analysis, the first five consciousnesses correspond to the five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch.

### Sixth

The sixth consciousness integrates the perception of the five senses into coherent images and makes judgments about the external world. For example, take a rose petal. It is red, soft and fragrant.

Our sixth consciousness compiles these sensory data and comes up with the idea of a rose, as opposed to, say, a strawberry. Together, the first six consciousnesses form the conscious mind.

### Seventh

In contrast to the first six consciousnesses, which deal with the external world, the seventh, or *mano* consciousness, does not rely directly on the senses. It discerns the inner world. From the seventh consciousness comes the considered judgment: A rose is quite beautiful.

Awareness of and attachment to the self are said to originate from the *mano* consciousness, as does the capacity to distinguish between good and evil. When we are awake, the realm of the six senses is dominant. When we are asleep, the hidden seventh consciousness surfaces in the form of dreams, while the functions of the six senses become latent.

### Eighth

The eighth level, the *alaya* consciousness, is a step deeper than the *mano* consciousness, or

the realm of individual ego. All the functions of our six senses as reactions, to outer stimulation and our judgments about them, even our most fleeting impressions, are stored and recorded in the eighth consciousness. This storehouse is roughly comparable to memory, but it is also more than that. Buddhism suggests that the eighth consciousness remembers and stores not only everything we have experienced in this life — including all the causes we have made through thoughts, words and actions — but also everything we have experienced in the remote past.

Instead of an ethereal soul, Buddhism espouses the notion of a true self, which continues to exist whether one is alive or deceased. The *alaya* consciousness may be thought of as the realm that interweaves all the causes and effects constituting the destiny of this individual self. When this life reappears in the phenomenal world, the karmic seeds in the *alaya* consciousness bloom once again, but in new conditions and in a new physical form. One's self continues throughout eternity. Buddhism accepts this as fact. Whether dormant in death or manifest in living, it's the same life energy.

### **The Ninth Consciousness, or Buddhahood**

It can be said that the reason Buddhist teaching can put death into perspective is that it discovered the ultimate realm within one's life that is free from all karmic impurity. This is called the *amala* consciousness, or enlightenment. *Amala* here means absolute purity. It is a realm connected directly with the life of the universe, which is understood to be Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, the ultimate law of life and death. Nichiren also called this realm “the palace of the ninth consciousness.” The ultimate message of the Lotus Sutra is that Buddhahood exists as a potential within everyone. Nichiren presented the way to reveal it from within and taught us the way to solidify it in us as well.

In *Unlocking the Mysteries of Birth and Death*, Daisaku Ikeda wrote: “Nichiren Daishonin gave concrete expression to the amala-consciousness — the fundamental reality of life — in the phrase Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, and he gave physical form to his enlightenment to the original cosmic life in the Gohonzon, the object of devotion, thus opening a path whereby all people can achieve Buddhahood, manifesting the greater self that is latent within them. When we devote ourselves to the Gohonzon, we find joy and determination welling forth as we are brought face to face with the reality that our own existences are coextensive with the eternal life of the universe. When we devote ourselves to and base our lives on this reality — the *amala* consciousness — all the other eight consciousnesses work to express the immense power and the infinite wisdom of the Buddha nature” (p. 165).