The Oral Tradition regarding the Enlightenment of Plants

QUESTION: Does the enlightenment of plants pertain to sentient beings or to insentient beings?

Answer: The enlightenment of plants pertains to insentient beings.

Question: Are both sentient and insentient beings assured of attaining enlightenment in the Lotus Sutra?

Answer: That is correct.

Question: What proof of this can be cited?

Answer: The proof is in the words Myoho-RENge-Kyo. The word myōhō represents the attainment of enlightenment by sentient beings; the word Renge represents the attainment of enlightenment by insentient beings. Sentient beings attain enlightenment in life, insentient beings attain enlightenment in death. The attainment of enlightenment in life and death refers to the attainment of enlightenment by sentient and insentient beings. Hence, when we living beings die, wooden tobā memorial tablets¹ are set up, and eye-opening ceremonies are conducted to consecrate them. This is an example of attainment of enlightenment in death, or the enlightenment of plants.

Volume one of Great Concentration and Insight states, “There is not one color or one fragrance that is not the Middle Way.” Miao-lo comments on this by saying, “Thus people are willing to admit that color and fragrance both represent the Middle Way. But if you tell them that insentient beings possess the Buddha nature, this perplexes their ears and alarms their minds.”²

Regarding the term “one color,” which of the five colors does this refer to? The commentary states that all five colors, blue, yellow, red, white, and black, are referred to in the term “one color.” The word “one” refers to the essential nature of phenomena. This is how Miao-lo in his commentary interprets the statement that colors and fragrances represent the Middle Way, and thus the Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai is saying that there are none of these that are not the Middle Way.

The word “one” in the statement regarding “one color” or “one fragrance” is not to be taken as “one” in contrast to “two” or “three.” Rather it is saying that “one” refers to the Middle Way, or the essential nature of phenomena. In effect, [there is not one color or one fragrance] that does not contain the Ten Worlds, the three thousand realms, life and its environment, and so forth. These colors and fragrances constitute the enlightenment of plants, that is, the enlightenment of Renge, or the lotus. The term “color and fragrance” and the term Renge differ in wording, but both refer to the enlightenment of plants.
The oral tradition says that the Buddha can become grass and trees. This means that the Shakyamuni Buddha of the "Life Span" chapter can manifest himself in grass and trees. The Lotus Sutra speaks of "the Thus Come One's secret and his transcendental powers." There is nothing in the entire realm of phenomena that is not the manifestation of the Thus Come One Shakyamuni.

The principle of the dormant Buddha nature to be manifested by ordinary people represents death; it represents Myōhō, or the wonderful Law. The actual fact of the Buddha manifesting his original state represents life; it represents Renge, or the lotus. The principle of the dormant Buddha nature, representing death, presides over sentient beings. The actual fact of the Buddha manifesting his original state, representing life, presides over insentient beings. What we living beings rely on, are dependent upon, are the insentient beings of Renge. The words and sounds uttered by us living beings, which pertain to life, are manifestations of Myōhō as it is embodied in sentient beings.

Our bodies are endowed with both sentient and insentient elements. Our nails and hair are insentient—when we cut them, we feel no pain. The other elements, however, are sentient—cutting them inflicts pain and distress. Thus a single body is endowed with both sentient and insentient elements.

Both these sentient and insentient elements are endowed with the ten factors of life and the two principles of cause and effect. Thus these sentient and insentient elements make up the three realms of existence: the realm of living beings, the realm of the five components, and the realm of the environment.

The doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life I have revealed in all its purity in the great mandala. It is a doctrine that the scholars of the present age, lacking comprehension in such matters, cannot fathom even in their dreams. T'ien-t'ai, Miaolo, and Dengyō pondered it in their minds but did not spread it abroad. They said only that there is not one color or one fragrance that is not the Middle Way, but that such words perplex the ear and alarm the mind. Instead of Myoho-renge, they called it the concentration and insight of perfect and immediate enlightenment.

Thus the enlightenment of plants refers to the attainment of Buddhahood by those that are dead. Doctrines of this nature are known to few persons. In the end, if one does not understand the meaning of Myoho-renge, such doctrines may lead one astray.

You must not under any circumstances forget what I have said here.

With my deep respect,

Nichiren

The twentieth day of the second month

Reply to Sairen-bō

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**Background**

While in exile on the island of Sado, Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter on the twentieth day of the second month in 1272. It is addressed to Sairen-bō, a priest of the Tendai school who was also in exile on Sado and who earlier in the same month had become the Daishonin's disciple. The title refers
to the Tendai school doctrine known as the enlightenment of plants. The Daishonin points out that this refers to the attainment of Buddhahood by sentient beings, and that the Lotus Sutra reveals that sentient as well as sentient beings can attain enlightenment.

He explains that, of the words Myoho-renge-kyo, myōhō stands for the attainment of Buddhahood by sentient beings, and renge stands for the attainment of Buddhahood by those that are sentient or dead. He then refers to the Japanese Buddhist custom of erecting wooden tōba, or memorial tablets, saying that conducting eye-opening ceremonies upon such tablets indicates that enlightenment is possible for sentient matter and for the dead, and that this accords with the principle of the enlightenment of plants.

Next, Nichiren Daishonin interprets the statement from T’ien-t’ai’s Great Concentration and Insight “There is not one color or one fragrance that is not the Middle Way” by citing Miao-lo’s commentary on it, and concludes, “This means that the Shakyamuni Buddha of the ‘Life Span’ chapter can manifest himself in grass and trees.” By this he is asserting that an object formed of sentient material such as wood or paper can manifest Buddhahood and thus serve as the object of devotion, or the Gohonzon.

The Daishonin points out that both sentient and sentient elements exist within our bodies, and that, according to T’ien-t’ai’s doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, the three realms of existence (the realms of the five components, living beings, and the environment) encompass both the sentient and sentient worlds and exist within our lives.

An essential aspect of the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, the doctrine of the enlightenment of plants provided the Daishonin with a theoretical basis for establishing a mandala made of wood or paper as the object of devotion in his teaching. Such great scholars as T’ien-t’ai, Miao-lo, and Dengyō pondered the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life in their minds but did not reveal it in a concrete form, says the Daishonin. Lastly, because what he has taught in this letter is so important, he admonishes Sairen-bō to remember it.

Notes

1. Tōba is a shortened form of the term sotōba, the Japanese transliteration of the Sanskrit word stupa, a type of shrine originating in India where the relics of Shakyamuni Buddha or other sage monks were housed. In Japan it was used as a grave marker or a wooden symbol of benefits bestowed upon the deceased.

2. The Annotations on “Great Concentration and Insight.”

3. The Shakyamuni Buddha of the “Life Span” chapter of the Lotus Sutra indicates the Buddha who revealed his attainment of Buddhahood in the remote past, or, from a more profound viewpoint, the Buddha of beginningless time who embodies the eternal Law or the ultimate truth of life and the universe. That this Buddha “can manifest himself in grass and trees” represents the doctrine of the enlightenment of plants and provides a theoretical basis for the inscription of the mandala called the Gohonzon.

4. Lotus Sutra, chap. 16.

5. “Those that are dead” here means not only the deceased but also those forms of life that possess no senses, emotions, or consciousness, that is, sentient beings, which include plants.