

On Attaining Buddhahood in One's Present Form



I HAVE received the one *koku* of rice, the amount for the eighth month.

The doctrine of the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form is clearly mentioned in a number of different Mahayana sutras and in the Mahāvairochana Sutra. But when persons hold that those abiding by these sutras can attain Buddhahood in their present form, they are guilty of two types of overbearing arrogance¹ and will invariably fall into the hell of incessant suffering.

Volume nine of *The Annotations on "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra"* states, "These two types of overbearing arrogance are not without difference in degree between them. One who supposes that ordinary human beings are the same as the Buddha is guilty of great shamelessness."²

When various Mahayana sutras speak of the doctrine of attaining Buddhahood in one's present form in connection with the teachings that earthly desires are enlightenment and that the sufferings of birth and death are nirvana, this would appear to be a very splendid and praiseworthy doctrine. But it cannot by any means be called the true doctrine of the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form.

The reason is as follows: When per-

sons of the two vehicles listened to the Buddha's preaching at Deer Park, they were able to free themselves from the illusions of thought and desire. But they had not yet freed themselves from the other two categories of illusion, illusions innumerable as particles of dust and sand, and illusions about the true nature of existence.³ They thought that they had already cut off all earthly desires, and that at death they would enter the nirvana of no remainder,⁴ thus reducing the body to ashes and annihilating consciousness. But if one reduces one's body to ashes, then this cannot mean that one attains Buddhahood in one's present form, and if one annihilates one's consciousness, this cannot be called the attainment of Buddhahood.

According to these [provisional Mahayana] sutras, however, ordinary people, unlike persons of the two vehicles, continue to have earthly desires and to be affected by karma. Their present bodily forms are temporary manifestations of the bitter effects of these forces. But so long as they retain their bodily forms, they can use their earthly desires and karma as seeds with which to produce the reward body and the manifested body of a Buddha. And, since in their present form they suffer from the bitter effects of earthly desires

and karma, then, because the sufferings of birth and death are nirvana, they can become a Thus Come One of the Dharma body. This is the argument used [by these provisional Mahayana sutras] to scold and berate the persons of the two vehicles.

The fact is, however, that through these sutras, earthly desires, karma, and suffering can never become the seeds that produce the three bodies of a Buddha, the Dharma body, the reward body, and the manifested body.

When we come to the Lotus Sutra, however, we find that earthly desires, karma, and suffering, which the persons of the two vehicles had supposedly shed when they entered the nirvana of remainder⁵ and the nirvana of no remainder, can in fact be drawn forth and utilized as a means to attain Buddhahood in one's present form. Thus the persons of the two vehicles are assured of attaining Buddhahood in their present form, and ordinary people are likewise assured of attaining Buddhahood in their present form.

When we stop to consider what this doctrine really means, we understand that though the proponents of the Flower Garland and True Word schools claim that through these sutras one can attain Buddhahood in one's present form, and though the sutras they rely upon may seem to make such a statement, it has no real meaning. This is how such erroneous assertions came into being.

It would appear that Kōbō, Jikaku, and Chishō were confused in their understanding of this doctrine of the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form, to say nothing of the ancient men of virtue who followed in their wake. Only when we come to Chūjin of Tōyō,⁶ the forty-sixth chief priest of the Tendai school, do we find someone who at least had certain doubts about the teachings of these men regarding this doctrine. But he

was a latter-day follower of the teaching line of the chief priest Jikaku of the Tendai school, foolish in many of his beliefs, and was unable in the end to free himself from error. In fact, even if those who were born in the country of Japan were to harbor doubts in their hearts, how could they possibly [challenge the authority of Kōbō and the others and] give voice to their concerns?

Nevertheless, Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and the Buddhas of the ten directions, the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna, and the Great Teachers T'ien-t'ai, Miao-lo, and Dengyō all understood that the true attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form is limited to the Lotus Sutra. My disciples and the followers of my teachings should keep this fact constantly in mind.

Regarding the character *myō* in the five characters Myōho-rence-kyo, the scholars and teachers have offered a variety of interpretations, but none of them go beyond the ideas presented in the sutras other than the Lotus Sutra. The only exception is Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna, who in his *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* states, "[The Lotus Sutra is] like a great physician who can change poison into medicine." This interpretation of his seems to get at the very heart of this character *myō*.

The "poison" in the above passage means the first two of the four noble truths, the truth that all existence is suffering and the truth that suffering is caused by selfish craving as well as the karmic cause and effect that confine living beings to the sufferings of birth and death. These are truly the poison to outdo all poisons. But through the extraordinary power of the character *myō*, or "wonderful," this poison is changed into the understanding that the sufferings of birth and death are nirvana, that earthly desires are enlight-

enment. This is the good medicine that can change poison into medicine, hence it is called good medicine.

In volume one hundred of *Great Perfection of Wisdom* by Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna, the Flower Garland, Wisdom, and other sutras are never described as *myō*, or “wonderful.” Only the Lotus Sutra, according to his interpretation, deserves to be called “wonderful.”

This treatise by Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna was introduced to China by the Tripitaka Master Kumārajīva. There the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai, after reading of this doctrine, used it to refute the teachings of the other schools of Buddhism in northern and southern China.⁷

But in China from around the middle of the T'ang dynasty, and in Japan after the Kōnin era [810–823], people appeared who were mistaken in their understanding of this doctrine. In the reign of Emperor Tai-tsung, the ninth ruler of the T'ang dynasty, a man named the Tripitaka Master Pu-k'ung came to China from India, bringing with him a treatise entitled *The Treatise on the Mind Aspiring for Enlightenment*.

This treatise was said to have been written by Nāgārjuna. It contains a passage that states: “Only in the True Word teachings can one attain Buddhahood in one's present form, because these teachings expound the practice of samādhi meditation. No such exposition is to be found in the other types of teachings.” Led astray by this passage, Kōbō, Jikaku, Chishō, and the others in their teachings fell into grave error.

No one questions the fact that *Great Perfection of Wisdom* is by Nāgārjuna. But while some people claim that *Mind Aspiring for Enlightenment* is by Nāgārjuna, others claim it is by Pu-k'ung. I will, however, not go into that question here.

There is one thing, nevertheless, that is strange. The whole point of *Great Perfection of Wisdom's* argument is that

the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form can only be achieved through the Lotus Sutra—the text is very clear on this matter and the argument is well reasoned. But if *Mind Aspiring for Enlightenment* is by Nāgārjuna, then why does it contradict *Great Perfection of Wisdom* by stating that the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form can only be achieved through the True Word doctrines, putting such strong emphasis on this one word “only”? What sutra passage does this one word “only” come from, that seems to deny the effectiveness of the Lotus Sutra? One demands some proof to support such an assertion. Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna in his *Commentary on the Ten Stages Sutra* says that doctrines that do not rely on the sutras are erroneous assertions. There must be no contradiction in the statements of a single author.

And in volume one hundred of *Great Perfection of Wisdom* Nāgārjuna states: “But the other sutras such as the Lotus Sutra contain bestowals of prophecy concerning the arhats' future attainment of Buddhahood. . . . These sutras are like a great physician who can change poison into medicine.” This comment expresses the concept of the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form [as it is embodied in the Lotus Sutra].

And yet *Mind Aspiring for Enlightenment*, though it is by the same great sage Nāgārjuna who wrote *Great Perfection of Wisdom*, differs in its pronouncements as greatly as fire does from water. But if we examine the matter closely, we find that Nāgārjuna is not here putting forward a different interpretation. Rather the fault lies with the person who translated the treatise into Chinese.

Kumārajīva's tongue, when put to the test, was not consumed by the fire,⁸ but the tongue of Pu-k'ung burned up. Thus it becomes clear that the tongues

of those who lie are burned, but the tongues of those who speak the truth are not.

There were 176 persons who conveyed the sutras and treatises of Buddhism from India to China. Among these, Kumārajīva alone passed along the sutra texts of Shakyamuni, the lord of teachings, just as they were without adding any private opinions of his own. Among the remaining 175 persons, 164 lived shortly before or after the time of Kumārajīva, and their work can be judged in the light of Kumārajīva's wisdom. In fact, his work brought to light the errors of these 164 men and also the errors of the eleven translators who later produced the so-called new translations,⁹ though they were somewhat cleverer than the earlier translators because they had Kumārajīva's works to guide them.

This is not simply an opinion of my own. *On Questions about the Practical Aspect of Precepts*¹⁰ states, "Fading in later ages, illuminating former ages." By "illuminating former ages," it means that Kumārajīva's wisdom threw light on the translations done by the men who lived from the Later Han to the Later Ch'in dynasties. By "fading in later ages," it means that the translators who came after Kumārajīva such as Shan-wu-wei, Chin-kang-chih, and Pu-k'ung, because they had Kumārajīva's wisdom to illuminate them, were somewhat cleverer than the earlier ones.

Practical Aspect of Precepts also says, "All the men who came after him [Kumārajīva] had to rely on his works."

Thus, although *Mind Aspiring for Enlightenment* may be the work of Nāgārjuna, the word "only" in the passage I have discussed earlier represents a private opinion inserted in the text by Pu-k'ung. And even more erroneous is the statement that follows, namely, that such doctrines are not to be found in the other types of teachings.

To ignore the Lotus Sutra, which is the guide and key to the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form, and instead to postulate the True Word teachings as the road to such attainment, although they have nothing whatsoever to do with it; and on top of that, to add the one word "only," asserting that the True Word teachings are the only path to such attainment—this is the most erroneous view imaginable in the whole world! This is in fact a doctrine expressive of nothing other than the asura nature.¹¹

The Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai Chih-che in volume nine of his *Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*, explaining the true meaning of the "Life Span" chapter, states: "The Buddha consistently possesses the three bodies throughout the three existences. But in the various teachings [other than the Lotus Sutra], he kept this secret and did not transmit it."

This passage makes it perfectly clear that the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form is expounded in the Lotus Sutra. But the Tripitaka Master Pu-k'ung, in order to deny this interpretation, exploits the work of Nāgārjuna and makes it read, "Only in the True Word teachings can one attain Buddhahood in one's present form, because these teachings expound the practice of samādhi meditation. No such exposition is to be found in the other types of teachings."

The treatise then goes on to explain how [True Word practitioners] attain Buddhahood in their present form. But what is described there is not really attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form; it is merely something like the attainment in one's present body of the stage where one perceives the non-birth and non-extinction of the phenomenal world. This person Pu-k'ung has heard that the doctrine of the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form is a rare and won-

derful teaching, but he has failed to understand what this teaching actually means. To tell the truth, it is the teaching found in the Lotus Sutra, which assures the attainment of Buddhahood by persons of the two vehicles and reveals Shakyamuni's attainment of Buddhahood in the remote past. Hence the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai says that "in the various teachings [other than the Lotus Sutra], he [the Buddha] kept this secret and did not transmit it." This interpretation of his is as wonderful as fragrant sandalwood!

In the three thousand or more volumes of the non-Buddhist scriptures, it is recorded that if there is any deviation from the proper way of government, the times will become troubled. And in the five thousand or seven

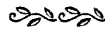
thousand volumes of the Buddhist scriptures, it is made clear that if erroneous views are held with regard to the Buddhist teachings, the times will become troubled.

Our present age departs from what is taught in the non-Buddhist scriptures, and goes against the Buddhist scriptures as well, and therefore the whole country stands accused of a major offense. In fact, the country is already on the verge of ruin. How pitiful, how pitiful!

Nichiren

The second day of the seventh month

Reply to the wife of Ōta



Background

On Attaining Buddhahood in One's Present Form is a reply to the wife of Ōta Jōmyō, written by Nichiren Daishonin at Minobu in 1275. Ōta Jōmyō lived in Nakayama of Shimōsa Province. The couple had been followers of the Daishonin's teachings since early on.

The Daishonin begins by explaining that though other sutras mention the principle of attaining Buddhahood in one's present form, they in fact do not enable one to achieve Buddhahood. Only the Lotus Sutra, he asserts, teaches that persons of the two vehicles and ordinary people can attain Buddhahood in their present form. Nevertheless, the True Word school not only claims that their teachings include a doctrine of attaining Buddhahood in one's present form, but also slanders the Lotus Sutra. The Daishonin points out the error of the patriarchs of that school, men such as Shan-wu-wei and Kōbō, and of Jikaku and Chishō, who

incorporated True Word doctrines into the Tendai school.

Next, the Daishonin states that, among those who traveled from India to China and translated the sutras and treatises into Chinese, Kumārajīva alone correctly transmitted the Buddha's true intent without interpolating his own views. As to the question of which teaching enables one to attain Buddhahood in one's present form, he addresses the fact that two works by the great Buddhist scholar Nāgārjuna seem to offer conflicting views. While Nāgārjuna's *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* indicates that the Lotus Sutra alone enables one to attain Buddhahood in one's present form, *The Treatise on the Mind Aspiring for Enlightenment* by the same author contradicts this with passages to the effect that it can only be achieved through the esoteric doctrines of the True Word school. The Daishonin concludes that

this is not in fact a contradiction in Nāgārjuna's interpretation, but the result of a mistranslation. The former was translated by Kumārajīva and the latter by Pu-k'ung, who, concerned with propagating the esoteric teachings in

China, injected his personal opinion into his translation.

Lastly, the Daishonin confirms that errors in Buddhism as well as errors in government will lead to ruin of the nation.

Notes

1. One type of overbearing arrogance is the arrogance of clinging to the theory that ordinary human beings are the same as the Buddha, thus neglecting Buddhist practice and failing to attain Buddhahood. The other is the arrogance of refusing to believe in the teaching of the Lotus Sutra that ordinary human beings who are not free from greed, anger, and foolishness are capable of attaining Buddhahood in their present form.

2. This passage is found in volume ten of the extant version of that text.

3. See three categories of illusion in Glossary.

4. The "nirvana of no remainder" is that which the arhat is said to achieve at death, when both body and mind—the source of suffering—are extinguished. Because Hinayana Buddhism taught that the ultimate goal of practice can only be achieved at death, it was criticized as the teaching of "reducing the body to ashes and annihilating consciousness."

5. The "nirvana of remainder" refers to the nirvana of the arhat who has eliminated all illusions and will no longer be reborn in the six paths, but who is still bound to the world of suffering in that he possesses a body.

6. Chūjin (1065–1138) studied the esoteric and esoteric teachings on Mount Hiei from his childhood. Later, he lived at a lodging temple called Tōyō, where he

spread the teachings of the Eshin school, a branch of the Tendai school, and helped restore the Tendai school. In 1130, he became the forty-sixth chief priest of Enryaku-ji, the head temple of the Tendai school on Mount Hiei.

7. See three schools of southern China and seven schools of northern China in Glossary.

8. According to *The K'ai-yüan Era Catalog of the Buddhist Canon* and *The Liang Dynasty Biographies of Eminent Priests*, when Kumārajīva's body was cremated, his tongue remained unburned as a sign of the accuracy with which he had produced the sutra translations and explained the meaning of the Buddhist teachings.

9. The translations made before Hsüan-tsang (602–664) are called "old translations." His and subsequent translations are known as "new translations," and tend to be more literal.

10. A work compiled by Tao-hsüan (596–667), the founder of the Nan-shan branch of the Precepts school in China.

11. The nature of asuras, or contentious demons, described in Buddhist scriptures. It is a nature characterized by a constant desire to surpass others and a fondness for dispute. Here the Daishonin applies it to the proponents of the True Word teaching, who went to great lengths to portray their doctrine as superior to that of the Lotus Sutra.