The Attainment of Buddhahood in Principle and in Its Actual Aspect

Around the middle of the seventh month I sent you a general explanation of the differences between the teaching of the True Word school and the teaching of the Lotus Sutra about the doctrine of attaining Buddhahood in one's present form. Since then I am sure that you must have embraced the Lotus Sutra's teaching of attaining Buddhahood in one's present form. If that is not the case, then it must be the teaching of the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form that does not actually lead to Buddhahood, which is the one held by people in society today.

This worries me. I hope that you will pay careful attention to and ponder what I wrote out and sent you at that time. Besides, all the well-known scholars in society recognize the vital importance of the doctrine of attaining Buddhahood in one's present form. My disciples and followers in particular, then, should set everything else aside and give their attention to this single doctrine. The teachings I have spoken of in various places over a period of twenty-seven years, from the fifth year of Kenchō [1253] to the present, the third year of Kōan [1280], are numerous, but fundamentally my purpose has been this one alone.

Some scholars in society think that the doctrine of attaining Buddhahood in one's present form as set forth by the True Word school is supreme because the anointment ceremony that confers the status of enlightenment on bodhisattvas of the specific teaching is based on the three True Word sutras, such as the Mahāvairochana Sutra, which are included in the four flavors and three teachings preached by Shakūyamuni. Actually this practice merely leads a bodhisattva in the ten stages of devotion, one of the seven groups of bodhisattva stages, to move on to the next stage, the stage of joy. In no way is it the doctrine of the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form revealed in the perfect teaching.

Even if they should insist that the doctrine is found in the True Word sutras, they would be doing no more than discussing a benefit gained from the practice at the stage of joy. This is little more than a practice carried out as a cause of enlightenment by bodhisattvas at the ten stages of development, but those at the ten stages of development or at the stage of near-perfect enlightenment know nothing at all about the state of Buddhahood. If I discuss the matter from a stricter viewpoint, that of the perfect teaching, it is no different than the state of life in each instant that abides at the two
Buddhahood in its actual aspect

stages of hearing the name and words of the truth, and of perception and action, which are a part of the six stages of practice. And if I view it leniently, it would be the state of the fusion of practice and principle contained in the stage of perception and action. But this by no means compares with the state in the stage of perception and action where the principle and wisdom correspond. And even if the text of The Treatise on the Mind Aspiring for Enlightenment is referred to, or even if the words of the three sutras such as the Mahāvairochana are relied upon, it is still anything but the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form. It is a doctrine that fails to measure up even to the stage where one in one's present body perceives the non-birth and non-extinction of all phenomena.

Nonetheless, people in society are taken in by the passage in Mind Aspiring for Enlightenment that asserts that "only in the True Word teachings [can one attain Buddhahood in one's present form]." They are convinced that the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form is unique to the True Word school. Because of this, they call the Lotus Sutra, which sets forth the correct doctrine on the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form, mere "childish theory." This is what the fifth volume of Great Concentration and Insight is referring to when it says, "Even those who turn their backs on the world amuse themselves with an inferior vehicle, clinging to mere branches and leaves. They are like dogs that tag after the servants. They pay honor to apes and monkeys, considering them like the god Shakra; they revere shards and rubble, looking on them as bright gems. With such ignorant and benighted persons, how can one discuss the way?"

It is lamentable indeed. The scholars of the Flower Garland, True Word, and Dharma Characteristic schools are merely wasting their time trying to establish a doctrine of attaining Buddhahood in one's present form.

First of all, you should take the dragon king's daughter as proof of the validity of the Lotus Sutra doctrine of attaining Buddhahood in one's present form. The "Devaḍatta" chapter says, "[This girl] in the space of an instant could actually achieve correct enlightenment." It also says, "[All saw the dragon girl in the space of an instant] change into a man." And again, it reads, "Immediately proceeding to the Spotless World of the south..." The Great Teacher Dengyō says, "The dragon king's daughter, an instructor of others, did not need to undergo countless kalpas of austere practice, nor do living beings, who receive instruction, need to undergo such practice. Instructors and instructed alike need no such kalpas of practice. Through the power of the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law they can attain Buddhahood in their present form."

Moreover, the Lotus Sutra expounds two kinds of attaining Buddhahood in one's present form. The theoretical teaching of the sutra expounds the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form in principle, and the essential teaching expounds the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form in its actual aspect. The essential teaching's doctrine of attaining Buddhahood in one's present form concludes that one can attain supreme enlightenment in one's present status as an ordinary person, without changing individual characteristics. That is why one's physical form, just as it is, is the Thus Come One who in his original state is eternally endowed with the three bodies. This doctrine is found nowhere else in the entire lifetime of Shakyamuni's teachings. The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra reads, "In the various teachings, he [the Buddha] kept this secret and did not transmit it."
Furthermore, there are two time periods when the Lotus Sutra spreads. They are the time when Shakyamuni was in the world and the Latter Day of the Law. Likewise, there are two teachings that are put into practice. In the Buddha’s lifetime, it was the pure and perfect teaching, the sutra of the single true teaching. And now, the Latter Day after the Buddha’s passing, is the time when the essential teaching alone will spread.

Already two hundred and more years have passed since the time for the spread of the theoretical teaching ended. T’ien-t’ai and Dengyō were the very persons who could propagate the theoretical teaching, and both have passed away. Nichiren has truly been given this time. How could I possibly not spread the essential teaching, which perfectly suits the age? There is a vast difference between the essential teaching and the theoretical teaching in terms of the capacity of the people, the doctrine, and the time of its spread.

Question: Are you, Nichiren, the only one aware of this matter?

Answer: “Vasubandhu and Nāgārjuna clearly perceived the truth in their hearts.” The Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai says, “In the last five-hundred-year period, the mystic way will spread and benefit humankind far into the future.” The Great Teacher Dengyō states, “The Former and Middle Days are almost over, and the Latter Day is near at hand. Now indeed is the time when the one vehicle of the Lotus Sutra will prove how perfectly it fits the capacities of all people. How do we know this is true? Because the ‘Peaceful Practices’ chapter of the Lotus Sutra states, ‘In the latter age hereafter, when the Law is about to perish [accept and embrace the Lotus Sutra].’ These scholars and teachers knew that in the Latter Day of the Law, the age of con-

flict, the Bodhisattvas of the Earth would appear and spread Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the heart of the essential teaching. They longed for this time and made comments such as these.

Furthermore, with regard to the attainment of Buddhahood in one’s present form, the theoretical teaching is the gate that makes entry possible, while the essential teaching is the true doctrine that makes the attainment of Buddhahood in one’s present form possible. Whether concerning those who are believed to have gained the way through the theoretical teaching, or whether concerning the attainment of Buddhahood in terms of the seeds of similar species or in terms of the seeds of opposite species, the true significance of attaining Buddhahood in one’s present form is found only in the “Life Span” chapter of the essential teaching. Thus always consider the matter in this way. This is correct understanding.

Moreover, in spite of the fact that even such men of past ages as these puzzled over the doctrine of attaining Buddhahood in one’s present form, your having inquired about this doctrine again and again in this way in your situation as a woman is surely no ordinary thing. Has Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, taken possession of you? Or are you following in the footsteps of the dragon king’s daughter? Or perhaps Gautami has appeared again. I do not know, but without fail the clouds of the five obstacles will lift from you in an instant and you will gaze on the tranquil light of the moon of awakening. I will write again in detail another time.

Nichiren

The fifth day of the tenth month in the third year of Kōan [1280]

Reply to Myōichi-nyo
Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter on the fifth day of the tenth month in 1280 at Minobu in answer to a question posed by the lay nun Myōichi-nyo. Three months earlier he had written an answer to a related question from her, and now he praises her for asking questions “again and again” about the doctrine of attaining Buddhahood in one’s present form. In this letter the Daishonin emphasizes first the vital importance of this doctrine for believers in his teaching, and second, that the true doctrine of attaining Buddhahood in one’s present form is found in the Lotus Sutra alone. In the Lotus, he says, the doctrine is set forth both in principle, in the theoretical teaching, and in its actual aspect, in the essential teaching. Further, he explains, the time to spread Nam-myoho-RENge-kyo, the heart of the essential teaching, is now, the Latter Day of the Law. He points to statements by the Great Teachers T’ien-t’ai and Dengyō showing that, in addition to Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu, they too understood that the heart of the essential teaching, Nam-myoho-RENge-kyo, would be spread in the Latter Day and that they longed for this time.

Notes

1. “The seven groups of bodhisattva stages” refers to the seven groups of fifty-two stages of bodhisattva practice—ten stages of faith, ten stages of security, ten stages of practice, ten stages of devotion, ten stages of development, the stage of near-perfect enlightenment, and the stage of perfect enlightenment. “The stage of joy” mentioned next in the text is the first of the ten stages of development. It is the stage in which one rejoices at realizing a partial aspect of the truth.

2. The Precious Key to the Secret Treasury, a work by Kōbō, the founder of the True Word school.

3. The Outstanding Principles of the Lotus Sutra.

4. Great Concentration and Insight.

5. The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra.


7. “The attainment of Buddhahood in terms of the seeds of similar species” means that the three inherent potentials—the innate Buddha nature, the wisdom to perceive it, and the good deeds to develop this wisdom and cause the Buddha nature to emerge—work together to enable one to attain Buddhahood. “The attainment of Buddhahood in terms of the seeds of opposite species” means that the three paths of earthly desires, karma, and suffering manifest as the three virtues of the Dharma body, wisdom, and emancipation, thus enabling one to attain Buddhahood.