

## Humanism Is at the Core of Buddhism

by Brian Matsuo

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*The history of Buddhism—from the establishment of Buddhism by Shakyamuni, to the advent of the Daishonin's Buddhism and today's SGI movement led by President Daisaku Ikeda—reveals that Buddhism is a continuous reform movement that seeks to establish the happiness of humanity and the dignity of life as the fundamental principles of society. Based on this respect for the dignity of life, the significance of our SGI movement and our individual human revolution cannot be underestimated, as part of the process that makes such humanistic social reform possible.*

IN the foothills of the Himalayas, near the Indian border south of central Nepal, the historical founder of Buddhism, Shakyamuni,<sup>1</sup> was born. Although the exact date of his birth is unknown, historians believe it was the end of the eleventh century B.C.E. (some sources say the fifth or sixth centuries B.C.E). Buddhism, as we know it today, originates from the teachings of Shakyamuni or the Buddha. Derived from Sanskrit, the term *Buddha* means an “enlightened” or “awakened one.”

At that time in Indian society, people were divided according to a strict hierarchical structure called the caste system. The caste system placed people at different levels of society based on their birth, with Brahmans, or the priestly class, at the highest level, and the untouchables (people laboring in indispensable but unsavory jobs such as garbage handlers or butchers) at the lowest level of society. It was socially unacceptable for people to marry across classes or even to mingle with people of the untouchable class.

Based on his enlightened view of life, Shakyamuni desperately wished to reform people's perception of life and one another. He believed that all people had the potential for enlightenment, and strove to enable all people, equally, to become happy. Based on his conviction in the dignity of life, Shakyamuni relentlessly taught the people in their own language<sup>2</sup> that they could become happy. His ultimate teaching was revealed in the Lotus Sutra. His compassionate and humanistic behavior revealed to others how a human being could live.

After the Buddha's passing, his followers, afraid of losing his elevated view of life, began to gather and discuss his teachings, recording them for ages to come. Among these Buddhist councils, the most famous took place under the patronage of King Ashoka<sup>3</sup> (268–232 B.C.E.) with the Monastery playing the central role. The Buddha's teachings were originally passed on orally, and his disciples would begin their discourse with the words, “Thus I heard...,” which is why many sutras begin with this phrase. In this way Shakyamuni's teachings were compiled over several centuries after his death.

The various Buddhist councils meant to preserve the Buddha's words for the people. In spite of their good intentions, over time the spirit of Shakyamuni's teachings was lost as the members of the Buddhist Order became more and more separate from society. They began to view themselves as an elite group, select in understanding Shakyamuni's teachings. This Order became known as the Hinayana

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movement or “lesser vehicle teaching.”<sup>4</sup> Today, it is referred to as the Theravada school of Buddhism.

Some people were uncomfortable with this development in the Buddhist Order because they felt it went against Shakyamuni’s true intention. They awoke to the original viewpoint that Buddhism was for the happiness of all people. With this awareness they began to reform the Order both from within and without. They returned to Shakyamuni’s original teaching that all people equally had the potential to attain enlightenment, and began to involve the priesthood and laity alike, as equal participants in the pursuit of human happiness. This reform movement later became known as Mahayana Buddhism, or the Buddhism of the “greater vehicle.”

THERAVADA Buddhism spread mostly to countries in Southeast Asia, and Mahayana Buddhism spread northward to China, Korea and Japan. As Buddhism moved eastward, it was translated from one language to the next. The people who could translate the teachings were usually highly educated people or priests from the upper classes of society because traditionally they were the only ones to receive an education. So unfortunately, once again Buddhism became a religion of an elite group of priests who prayed for the laity and received alms in return.

At the time of Nichiren Daishonin’s advent in the thirteenth century, the priesthood of various sects of Buddhism formed an elite group of religious specialists, a privileged class, which once again separated itself from the rest of society. By this time, there were so many sects based on differing interpretations of Buddhism that people were confused and simply followed the religion their parents practiced.

It was this confused and chaotic era in which Nichiren Daishonin was born. Through his intense and extensive studies of Buddhism, he awakened to the true intention of Shakyamuni expressed in the depths of the Lotus Sutra. Realizing that all people equally possess the ability to become happy, the Daishonin clarified the Buddha’s original intent and revealed the essential meaning and practice of Buddhism for people in the Latter Day of the Law.<sup>5</sup> By establishing the practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and inscribing the Gohonzon, Nichiren Daishonin enabled all people in the Latter Day of the Law to attain the supreme state of happiness, or Buddhahood, in their lives.

We can clearly see that the Daishonin’s actions represented yet another reformation movement within Buddhism that established the concept of the dignity of life for all humanity as the fundamental tenet of Buddhism. The authorities of the time, both religious and secular, constantly persecuted the Daishonin because the very basis of his movement undermined the power and prestige they had come to enjoy.

History has a tendency to repeat itself, and once again the deviation from the original spirit of Buddhism is apparent in the recent actions of the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood against the SGI and its president, Daisaku Ikeda. Even within the Nichiren Shoshu of the past, there were episodes when priests

attempted to reform a corrupt and distorted priesthood [see “The Untold History of the Fuji School,” p. 12]. For example, both the ninth high priest, Nichiu, and the twenty-sixth high priest, Nichikan, are revered as reformers of Nichiren Shoshu who returned the sect to harmony with the original spirit of the Daishonin.

TODAY, the so-called “temple issue” is completely based on the spirit of reformation. It includes exchanging Gohonzon transcribed by Nikken for Gohonzon transcribed by the twenty-sixth high priest, Nichikan, who, as mentioned previously, was a reform priest. It also includes meeting and talking with individuals under the influence of Nikken about the true spirit and intention of Buddhism. Through these various activities, we are returning to the fundamental spirit of the Daishonin’s Buddhism to save all humanity.

It has been my observation that the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood feels they are preserving the orthodoxy of Buddhism simply because they possess the Dai-Gohonzon.<sup>6</sup> But as the history of the sect attests, high priests have deviated from the teachings of the Daishonin repeatedly—in spite of the fact that they possessed the Dai-Gohonzon.

The Nichiren Shoshu priesthood feels they are special and unique and, therefore, better than the laity. The sect’s chief administrator, Nichijun Fujimoto, writes in a letter to the SGI in 1991: “To talk about the priesthood and laity with a sense of equality are expressions of great conceit. In fact, they correspond to the five cardinal sins... (January 12, 1991, letter to the Soka Gakkai from Nichiren Shoshu’s chief administrator, Nichijun Fujimoto).

Unfortunately, those who are sincerely following the alleged authority of Nikken and the priesthood end up losing their independence and sense of equality, which is contrary to the most basic intentions of Buddhism. This is why Nichiren Shoshu does not represent the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin but rather Nikken’s own distorted personal view.

True humanism, as expressed in Buddhism, is characterized by a life based on inner motivation and the view that all people are equal. These two aspects of humanism are explored by President Ikeda in several university addresses. Buddhism teaches that these two points can be fully actualized through the process we know as human revolution—an inner reformation of the life of each individual.

This revolution occurs when an individual challenges the many different views of life in society and attempts to establish a harmonious balance between the self and the environment. SGI-USA members, through their faith, become happier by grappling with their own personal problems and with the contradictions of society, and creating value in that process. That is the process of human revolution. “In other words, human revolution is expanding your view beyond your restricted, ordinary, everyday world and striving for and dedicating yourself to achieving something more noble, more profound, more all-embracing” (*Discussions on Youth*, vol. 2, p. 247).

PRESIDENT Ikeda once recalled the following episode: "One young man said: 'I'm having a hard time participating in SGI activities as much as I would like to because of my busy work schedule. How can I find a way to do both?'" Mr. Ikeda immediately replied, "To get right to the point, it boils down to making a decision to do your best in everything and then having the determination not to retreat a single step" (*The New Human Revolution*, vol. 4, pp. 144–45). Later he says: "There are two sides to everything. Not seeing things just one way is very human. Life involves striking a balance amid the tensions of conflicting issues while always striving to improve ourselves and move ahead" (*Ibid.*, p. 147). Rather than elucidating a tried and true formula for dealing with life's daily conflicts, Buddhism stresses developing a broad-minded attitude toward life, which requires an inner struggle that enables us to fully reveal our humanity. As a result of these inner struggles, we develop wisdom to lead a happy and humanistic life. This is the process of human revolution.

Buddhism introduces the concept of the Ten Worlds<sup>7</sup> inherent in all life. Since history is created by individuals, let us look at the reformation of the individual life from the Buddhist viewpoint of the Ten Worlds. The four lower worlds are Hell, Hunger, Animality and Anger. These lower worlds can be transformed into the six higher worlds through the practice of Buddhism, especially through the bodhisattva practice—the compassionate practice for the sake of others.

I would like to look at the life-state of Anger to clarify the process of human reformation. One characteristic of the world of Anger is an arrogant nature. Arrogance is the life-tendency to view oneself as superior to others. An arrogant person's mind is constantly occupied with the thought, "I am greater than everyone." In this state the explosive energy of anger is channeled into self-preservation or more specifically preservation of the image that "I am superior to everyone else." This energy can manifest itself in an aggressive manner; or it can show itself in humble behavior while in reality, one believes one is superior.

The three lower worlds of Hell, Hunger and Animality are basically dominated or influenced by the environment. The world of Anger moves beyond this reactive realm and establishes some autonomy and ability to act proactively. But this autonomy is based on the intense desire to win over others.

This desire to protect oneself and to win over others is the epitome of selfishness, which is why the life-state of Anger, as well as Hell, Hunger and Animality, can also be called the lesser self or lesser ego. How does one overcome this lesser self? By directing the energy from winning over others to winning over oneself, one can transform this lower world to more elevated states.

Another aspect of anger is jealousy. When one cannot win over others and the self is not recognized as superior, anger comes to the surface due to this defeat. Usually, we think of anger as a sudden powerful burst of emotion, but in observing it from a deeper level, anger often manifests insidiously as jealousy. In general, when we are jealous of others, we are actually admitting that they are better than us. This realization is unbearable to a mind consumed by the belief of its own greatness.

For example, in Shakyamuni's time, Devadatta<sup>8</sup> was jealous of Shakyamuni because everyone respected him. He wanted everyone to respect his greatness, too, so he did everything possible to defeat Shakyamuni, even attempting to kill him.

Today, when we observe the irrational actions of Nikken—the destruction of the Grand Reception Hall and Grand Main Temple (Sho-Hondo), which were built by the donations of thousands of sincere believers and the excommunication of millions of members who dedicate themselves to kosen-rufu—we can see that these actions are not motivated by a desire to protect the Law but by a desire to destroy the SGI and President Ikeda. Viewed in this light, Nikken's life must be dominated by the life-state of Anger, which is manifest as jealousy and arrogance.

HOW can we overcome this destructive state of life? In one of President Ikeda's speeches, he describes the transformation from the lower worlds to the higher worlds by using the concepts of lesser ego and noble ego, or lesser self and greater self. The following anecdote demonstrates true humanity, which is a reflection of the noble ego and higher life states. In a Nazi concentration camp, some of the survivors followed one basic rule—that as a group the members were to share everything. When any of the members began to keep food to themselves and did not share with others, that marked the beginning of the end for that individual. An individual who stopped sharing in that environment quickly deteriorated, losing not only their humanity, but, more often than not, their own lives.

The following story from the sutras reveals the difference between lives based on the greater self and those based on the lesser self. One day a person visited Hell. He was surprised to observe that there were mounds and mounds of food everywhere. It was like a feast for a thousand kings laid out before him. But the people there were emaciated, with their ribs jutting out and stomachs swollen from malnutrition. He discovered that everyone held chopsticks that were five feet long. So whenever someone picked up food to place it in their mouths, they were unable to get the long chopsticks to their lips and the food would fall to the ground. He left the misery behind him and visited Heaven.

Again he found a feast for a thousand kings. But unlike the people in Hell, these people were laughing and singing and plump as could be. The people in Heaven also had five-foot chopsticks, but they did not try to feed themselves. They simply fed one another, which the extra long chopsticks actually facilitated. The man realized then that the difference between Hell and Buddhahood is not the environment but the difference in the hearts of the people (see "Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra," p. 22). This struggle to establish the heart of the Buddha is the battle to develop our humanism.

The Lotus Sutra tells the story of Bodhisattva Fukyo<sup>9</sup> who held everyone in reverence. To each person he met, he said: "I deeply respect you. I would not dare despise you or be arrogant, for you will all practice the Bodhisattva way and surely attain Buddhahood." Therefore, he was called Bodhisattva Never Disparaging.

People ridiculed and attacked him with sticks and rocks, but he never retreated. He still bowed and praised the Buddha nature within them.

Nichiren Daishonin often cites the story of Bodhisattva Fukyo to illustrate the principle and practice of attaining enlightenment. The Daishonin states: "What does Bodhisattva Fukyo's profound respect for people signify? The real significance of the Lord Shakyamuni Buddha's appearance in this world lay in his behavior as a human being. How profound!" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 2, p. 16)

President Ikeda explains this principle of attaining enlightenment:

The spirit of the Buddhism of the true cause finds expression in the practice of cultivating respect for the dignity of life. It is the passage "Originally I practiced the Bodhisattva way" here in "Life Span" that directly indicates this.

"I" indicates Shakyamuni the ordinary human being—just like us—who carried out bodhisattva practices in the remote past. He definitely was not superhuman. "Remote past" means the wellspring of life; Shakyamuni the practitioner of the true cause represents the ordinary people of *kuon ganjo* who base themselves on the wellspring of life. (*Lectures on the "Expedient Means" and "Life Span" Chapters of the Lotus Sutra*, vol. 3, p. 16)

FROM this quotation we can see, in a sense, why Nichiren Daishonin exhorted us to practice for the happiness of ourselves and others based on faith in the Gohonzon, the wellspring of life.

The practice of Buddhism is the practice of cultivating respect for the dignity of life and cherishing the lives of other people.

It is easy to understand this in theory, but in reality it is difficult to overcome our selfishness and transform our small ego into our noble ego, concerned with the welfare of others. One of the best ways to accomplish this is through the process of human revolution.

By chanting and participating in activities with other SGI members, constantly striving for others' happiness, we are able to break the shell of the small ego and expand our world to that of the noble ego and the world of Buddhahood. This process is a never-ending battle between self-centeredness and the altruistic self, which takes place moment by moment, day after day.

Suppose you have accomplished something great or suddenly become very successful. Quite naturally you feel pride in your accomplishment. At that moment the lesser self may be activated. If you remain attached to your pride you may gradually develop a self-centered life that spirals toward unhappiness.

We should never underestimate the difficulty of this battle. Nichiren Daishonin expresses this in various writings. He says: "The believers of the Lotus Sutra should fear those who plague their practice more than they fear bandits, burglars, midnight killers, tigers.... This world is the province of the Devil of the Sixth Heaven. All of its people have been related to him since time without beginning..." (MW-1, 135).

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And in another writing: “I launched the battle of the provisional and true teaching ... I have raised the banner of *Myoho-renge-kyo* ... attacking first one and then another ... I have refuted the Nembutsu, Zen ... I continue to repulse their attacks and defeat them, but there are legions of enemies opposing ... So the battle goes on even today” (MW-1, 101). In another writing, he encourages us: “Because I have expounded this teaching, I have been exiled and almost killed. As the saying goes: ‘Good advice is harsh to the ears.’ But still I am not discouraged. The Lotus Sutra is like the seed, the Buddha is like the sower and the people are like the field” (MW-1, 166).

Even though this battle is difficult, Buddhism provides us with a positive approach to carry out our own reformation from lesser self to greater self and by extension the reformation of humanity. Through constant prayer and action, we are able to develop a truly positive mind and attitude toward life. In the letter “Three Tripitaka Masters Pray for Rain,” the Daishonin says: “Therefore, the best way to attain Buddhahood is to encounter a *zenchishiki*, or good friend. How far can one’s own wisdom take him. If one has even enough wisdom to distinguish hot from cold, he should seek out a good friend” (MW-5, 109).

When we develop our faith, all experiences and circumstances, no matter how bad they may seem, become good friends—propelling us on to even greater spiritual development. This is why Nichiren Daishonin encourages us to be the happiest people of all: “There is no greater happiness for human beings than chant-ing Nam-myoho-renge-kyo” (MW-1, 161). “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is like the roar of a lion” (MW-1, 119).

In the same letter he also states, “If one considers the power of the Lotus Sutra he will find perpetual youth and eternal life before his eyes” (MW-1, 120). Because we can definitely win in this battle, there is no more joyous world than the world of faith. People who chant have nothing to fear because there is no dead-end in Buddhism. With youthful vitality we can overcome any obstacles and gallantly advance with a sense of mission.

In the following quotation, Nichiren Daishonin illustrates the great concept of *kosen-rufu*: “Disasters will be driven from the land, and the people will be rid of misfortune. They will also learn the art of living long, fulfilling lives” (MW-1, 102). As a result of the process of individual reformation, society-at-large is transformed into a truly humanistic society.

Some may be concerned that the history of Buddhism is simply a repetitive process of reformation, but I believe social undercurrents are definitely showing that this reformation process is leading to a society based on humanism and respect for the dignity of life. This is why we should not underestimate the significance of our movement and our human revolution.

The great historian Arnold Toynbee, visualizing a global society, predicted, “The historians of A.D. 5047 will say, I fancy, that the importance of this social unification of mankind was not to be found in the field of technics and economics, and not in the field of war and politics, but in the field of religion” (May 1998 *Living Buddhism*, p. 20). Here, he alludes to the inevitability of the integration of humanism into society and the decisive role religion will play in

that process. So, together with President Ikeda, let us continue to practice joyfully and make the twenty-first century a century of humanity! □

1. *Shakya* is the name of the tribe in India to which Shakyamuni was born and *muni* means sage. So Shakyamuni means the sage of the Shakyas. It is said that his name was Gautama Siddhartha.
2. Not in the Vedic vernacular, which many priests believed holy teachings should be transmitted. In fact, Shakyamuni was criticized by priests who felt that the common language denigrated his teachings.
3. The third ruler of the Indian Maurya dynasty and the first king to unify India. He began as a tyrant but later governed compassionately in keeping with the ideals of Buddhism.
4. The terms *Hinayana* and *Mahayana* are considered derogatory terms. They were applied to Buddhism by a group within the religion that called itself Mahayana or the “Great Vehicle” and proclaimed its doctrines as superior to and superseding those of earlier Buddhism.
5. Latter Day of the Law: Known as the last of the three periods following Shakyamuni’s death when Buddhism falls into confusion and Shakyamuni’s teachings lose the power to lead people to enlightenment. It is said to last for ten thousand years or more.
6. The object of devotion inscribed by Nichiren Daishonin, October 12, 1279.
7. Ten states of life or life-conditions that a single entity of life manifests.
8. Devadatta: A disciple of Shakyamuni Buddha who later turned against him. Devadatta made several attempts on the Buddha’s life and persecuted the Buddha’s followers.
9. Fukyo: A bodhisattva described in “The Bodhisattva Never Disparaging,” the twentieth chapter of the Lotus Sutra.