

**WHAT a concept: on the basic ideas of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism**  
**Non-substantiality ('ku')**  
**Trying To Describe Life**  
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Understanding the Buddhist view of the reality of life gives us a deeper appreciation for our lives and the freedom we have to take off in new directions. The unseen or intangible nature of reality is called in Buddhism non-substantiality or formlessness (*ku*). Non-substantiality can't be defined in terms of existence or non-existence, nor can it be explained within the framework of time or space — which makes it hard to discuss.

Buddhism teaches that reality eclipses both existence and non-existence, both time and space. In “On Attaining Buddhahood,” Nichiren Daishonin puts it this way: “Life is indeed an elusive reality that transcends both the words and concepts of existence and nonexistence” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 5).

Perhaps the best way to describe non-substantiality is to say *what it is not*, as Shakyamuni did in listing the 34 negations: “The entity is neither existence nor nonexistence; neither cause nor circumstances; neither itself nor others; neither square nor round; neither short nor long; neither rising nor falling; neither birth nor death....” He's referring here to the life of *Buddha*, which is synonymous with the essence of life.

By describing the essence of life in this way, Shakyamuni wipes out our preconceived ideas and makes it hard for us to form value judgments. In other words, he's leading us to reconsider the very nature of life. Non-substantiality, likewise, defies our customary methods of comprehension. And it's a concept that opens us up to wondrous possibilities.

Non-substantiality implies that phenomena have no fixed or independent existence of their own but arise and continue to exist only by virtue of their relationship with other phenomena. Potentialities and possibilities are *ku*-ish, as are memories.

For example, a whiff of perfume can recall a vivid memory of your grandmother, say. Or hearing a sentimental song can transport you back to the first time you heard it. These memories are in the state of *ku* until they arise in relationship to the phenomena of the perfume or the song.

Perhaps we've all had the experience of “completely forgetting” about something, until happenstance suddenly reminds us of it. It could be said that these memories exist and yet don't exist — they're in us somewhere but would never arise independent of other phenomena. Similarly, Buddhahood, although it's intangible, is in us somewhere and arises concurrently with our chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo to the Gohonzon.

In light of non-substantiality, our dreams and aspirations for the future are very much like memories — except that memories have already happened, and our aspirations have yet to be fulfilled. Remember, though, the first rule of *ku* is that it defies our concepts of time and linear progression.

In other words, the life that we can imagine ourselves living is no more real or unreal than the life that we can remember ourselves living. That's *ku*.

This concept illustrates that we have the freedom to take a hairpin turn in a new direction at any given moment in our lives. Always our lives have the potential to move forward. Our future is in *ku* — it's a potentiality that's not determined by our past but by the actions we take in the present. Non-substantiality sets forth that this is the essential dynamic of life. Mastering this dynamism leads to a thorough understanding of Buddhism and the reality of life.

***One in a series***

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