

BUDDHIST CONCEPT FOR TODAY'S LIVING (14) MAKING THE BEST OF EVERYTHING: THE TEN FACTORS OF LIFE

Life is dynamic—its capacity for change from one moment to the next is immense. A hungry baby who was crying a minute ago now smiles in the arms of its mother. A heated dispute between lovers suddenly turns into an affectionate embrace. Does this mean that we are always at the mercy of whatever happens to us, that we must rely on pleasant experiences and circumstances at every moment to be consistently happy? It need not be so. Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism explains how we can make the best of everything—positive or negative—and take control of our lives.

Our lives express any of what Buddhism describes as the Ten Worlds¹—from the state of Hell to Buddhahood—at each moment, like each frame of a movie film projecting its image one at a time. Another set of ten—the ten factors—describes the workings of our lives in the context of the Ten Worlds and how we manifest change from one moment to the next. The concept of the ten factors, in other words, provides a philosophical still shot of our lives. It clarifies the functions common to all life in any given condition at any given moment.

The ten factors are described in the second, or “Expedient Means,” chapter of the Lotus Sutra: “The true entity of all phenomena can only be understood and shared between Buddhas. This reality consists of the appearance, nature, entity, power, influence, inherent cause, relation, latent effect, manifest effect, and their consistency from beginning to end” (*The Lotus Sutra*, trans. Burton Watson, p. 24).

The first three factors—appearance, nature and entity—make up life itself. “Appearance” describes the visible, outward aspect of life such as facial expressions and behavior. “Appearance” thus represents the physical or material aspects of life. “Nature” indicates the invisible inner quality and tendencies of life, for example, our disposition and character. “Nature” thus represents the spiritual aspect of life. “Entity” means life as a whole or the essence of life itself from which the material and spiritual aspects of life are manifest.

The rest of the ten factors describe the workings of life and their characteristics. “Power” is the capability latent within life. When this latent power becomes manifest, it is called “influence.” “Inherent cause” refers to our karmic orientations or tendencies formed by our past actions, that is, our thoughts, words and deeds. It refers to the internal causes or karma active at the moment we exert “influence” on our environment. “Relation” refers to our relationships with external circumstances, through which inherent causes become manifest. In this sense, “relation” may be viewed as an external cause. “Latent effect” is the result simultaneously implanted in one's life when an “inherent cause” acts in “relation” with an external event. “Latent effect,” however, is not yet manifest. When a “latent effect” becomes visible, it is called “manifest effect.” From the standpoint of a “manifest effect”—that is, if manifest effect is the only recognized effect—“inherent cause,” “relation” and “latent effect” collectively constitute a cause. “Consistency from beginning to end” means that life's appearance, nature, entity, power, influence, inherent cause, relation, latent effect and manifest effect all consistently express the condition that life is in at any particular moment.

For example, when doctors tell their patients that they have a serious illness, despair may result. The patients' complexions may pale (“appearance”), and they may feel depressed (“nature”). The body and mind, that is, their whole existence (“entity”) expresses a state of suffering. This hellish state can be also explained as follows: Upon hearing the diagnosis

(“relation”), the fear of illness (“inherent cause”), developed through past experience, is brought forth. The patients’ latent fear is now realized, and they feel hopeless (“latent effect”). They become anxious, break into a sweat and breathe heavily (“manifest effect”). When they hear this unfortunate news, all aspects of their entire being consistently manifests the state of Hell (“the consistency from beginning to end”). But if they later find out that their illness is much less serious, they may experience a state of joy.

What state or condition of being we manifest at any given moment determines how we experience our environment. On the deepest level, it is not our environment or external circumstances that determine our state of life but the nature of our “relation” with our environment. The same event, for example, may cause different reactions in different people. Some may feel defeated by illness or relationship problems while similar difficulties may inspire others to further develop their strength and character. Angry people are upset by small things while optimistic, confident people tend to remain calm regardless of their circumstances. The Ten Worlds are potentials within each of us. What we experience day to day, however, differs vastly from one person to another.

From the standpoint of Buddhism, how we relate to our environment largely depends upon how we have lived our lives, not only in this lifetime but in our past lives as well. Our past actions form karmic orientations, or what we might term life-habits, which constitute “inherent causes.” Based on these deep inner tendencies, we sometimes react automatically, either positively or negatively, to stimuli in our environment. Our reactions to our environment are often beyond conscious control or intellectual understanding. It is hard to explain why we hate certain animals or insects or feel attracted to a certain type of person.

The concept of the ten factors, therefore, teaches us the importance of developing good karmic habits in our lives so that we may consistently form positive “relations” with the events in our environment regardless of what they are. No matter how adverse our current circumstances, if our karmic tendencies are firmly grounded in the states of Bodhisattva or Buddhahood, our lives can transform every hardship into personal growth. Without such grounding, we tend to react negatively to negative situations and cause further confusion and suffering for ourselves and others. Our Buddhist practice—praying to the Gohonzon and encouraging others to practice—is the key to solidifying within us the states of Bodhisattva and Buddhahood, thus developing the habits or “inherent causes,” of happiness. □

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1. The Ten Worlds are distinct realms or categories of beings. From the lowest to the highest; they are the realms of 1) hell, 2) hungry spirits, 3) animals, 4) asuras, 5) human beings, 6) heavenly beings, 7) voice-hearers, 8) cause-awakened ones, 9) bodhisattvas, 10) Buddhas. The Ten Worlds are also interpreted as states of life (from “Glossary,” *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 1274). In the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin, those Ten Worlds are viewed as states of being that we experience from moment to moment, rather than distinctive physical realms. The Ten Worlds, therefore, may be understood as the states of hellish suffering, insatiable hunger, animality, belligerence, tranquil humanity, heavenly yet momentary joy, learning, self-realization, altruism and the supreme state of being characterized by compassion and wisdom.