

BUDDHIST CONCEPT FOR TODAY'S LIVING (18) PRACTICING FOR ONESELF PRACTICING FOR OTHERS

Solomon Ibn Gabriol (1022—1058/70), Hebrew poet and philosopher, wrote:

In seeking knowledge,
the first step is silence,
the second listening,
the third remembering,
the fourth practicing,
and the fifth —
teaching others.

Today, a number of educational programs emphasize the power of teaching others to facilitate one's own learning and mastery of the subject matter.

In addition, the tangible benefits of helping others, of altruism, are coming to be recognized widely in scientific and other circles as well. In the book *The Healing Power of Doing Good*, one researcher chronicles the results of a study about the positive effects of helping strangers. In the introduction he writes:

Now, with the findings from my survey, it has become evident that the dramatic improvements in health produced by helping have specific, identifiable stages. They begin with a physical high, a rush of good feeling. What I now call helper's high involves physical sensations that strongly indicate a sharp reduction in stress and the release of the body's natural painkillers, the endorphins. This initial rush is then followed by a longer-lasting period of improved emotional well-being. (Allan Luks, *The Healing Power of Doing Good* [New York: Ballantine Books, 1991] p. 10)

It seems, then, that no matter how hard we try to be unselfish—to forget about ourselves in the service of others—we cannot avoid gaining something ourselves from the act. This is all the more so in the realm of Buddhism, the purpose of which is to enable human beings to perfect themselves while helping others to become happy. Buddhists work to help others at a most basic and essential level of life; hence the benefits to the helper occur on a deep and fundamental level.

The foundation of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism exists in the essentials known as faith, practice and study. The element of practice is further divided into "practice for oneself" and "practice for others."

"Practice for oneself" refers to Buddhist practice to obtain the benefits of the Buddha's teachings. For practitioners of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, it means to reveal Buddhahood from within through faith in the Gohonzon and exert ourselves diligently in the morning and evening ceremony of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and reciting the sutra. "Practice for others" means to enlighten or educate others. It is providing people with a means to refine, educate and develop themselves. In Buddhism it means efforts to enable others to receive the benefit of the Buddha's teachings, that is, to enable others to awaken their innate Buddha nature. For practitioners of the Daishonin's Buddhism, this means to share the great power and benefit of chanting daimoku to the Gohonzon.

Buddhist practice for others has its roots in the Buddha Shakyamuni's (or Gotama's)

first public sermons. Immediately after his attainment of enlightenment, Shakyamuni wondered whether the Law or Dharma to which he had awakened was not too profound and inexplicable for people to understand, and so he hesitated to preach it. At that time, it is said, the Indian god Brahma appeared to Shakyamuni and beseeched him three times to teach the Dharma to the people. With this, Shakyamuni embarked on a lifetime of “practice for others.”

He called upon new converts to join him in walking among the various countries and provinces of India to teach the Dharma. From his first sermon on, Shakyamuni and his disciples devoted themselves to educating people about their potential for enlightenment and teaching the law of life to benefit others. The Buddha’s lifetime of teaching and practice thus set the original example of Buddhist “practice for others.” Shakyamuni’s teaching was not exclusivist like many Indian religious teachings of the time, but was open to all people. Regarding this, Buddhist scholar Hajime Nakamura writes:

It was unheard of in Gotama’s contemporary India to preach one’s teaching to all the people. This is obvious when we compare his situation with the various philosophers of the Upanishads, who limited their audience and often confined themselves to preaching to their own children, or distinguished individuals whom they deemed were qualified to receive instruction. Gotama Buddha broke this traditional restriction and doing so must have required considerable determination and courage. (Hajime Nakamura, *Gotama Buddha*. [Los Angeles: Buddhist Books International, 1987] p. 69)

After Shakyamuni’s death, such open and active teaching gradually diminished. The Buddhist monastics began to focus more on individual practices and disciplines thought to lead to enlightenment and became less engaged with the non-practicing community. This form of self-focused Buddhism was later dubbed Hinayana (Lesser Vehicle) by its critics, who felt the monks had lost the Buddha’s original spirit of “practice for others.” The reformist movement called Mahayana (Greater Vehicle) began to flourish and advocated a return to Shakyamuni’s original spirit. That spirit was expressed in the ideal of the bodhisattva—a practitioner dedicated to the enlightenment and happiness of others before his or her own happiness.

We can view the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin as a crystallization of Mahayana practice that contains within it both practice for oneself and practice for others. The Daishonin writes: “Now in the Latter Day of the Law, the daimoku that Nichiren chants is different than that of previous ages. It is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo that entails practice both for oneself and others” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1022).

He is saying here that the practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with the goals of one’s own happiness and that of others constitutes the correct and most effective Buddhist practice in this age.

A useful analogy in viewing the relationship between the basic elements of our Buddhist practice is that of an automobile. The running of the car’s engine is compared to faith, the turning of the wheels, to practice, and the driving of the car with knowledge of the directions and destination, to study. Further, the two wheels that transmit the engine’s power to the road are practice for oneself and practice for others. However much we rev the engine or how familiar we are with the route, if both wheels aren’t engaged and turning, we’re going to sit still. If one tire is flat (if either practice for self or practice for

others is missing), then naturally we won't arrive at the destination without repairing it.

Only when the power of faith (the engine) and the confidence derived from study (the ability of the driver) are strongly and consistently expressed as “practice for oneself” and “practice for others” (the wheels) will the car of our life make consistent progress toward the destination of enlightenment or happiness. From another perspective, while enlightenment is our destination, we are actually out to have a wonderful and enjoyable drive. When we harmonize these elements of Buddhist practice, our lives will be rich and enjoyable—even if there are bumps and hills to climb along the way.

We might also view “practice for others” as a lever, while our own problems and goals are like a large rock. If we try to move the rock directly, we may groan and strain against its weight without it budging. But if we use a good lever in the proper manner, we can move even an enormous rock with relative ease.

Agonizing and praying over our own problems alone may not give us the “leverage” required to move them in any meaningful way. By praying and acting for the sake of another person's success, growth, and happiness, we can achieve the “spiritual leverage” to transform our own seemingly heavy burdens. Our own triumph then becomes “leverage” to encourage others. In this way, practice for self and practice for others are never separate.

By Jeff Kriger, SGI-USA vice Study Department chief, partly based on Yasashii Kyogaku (Easy Buddhist Study).