

**BUDDHIST CONCEPT FOR TODAY'S LIVING (19)**  
**THE BODHISATTVA**  
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Several years ago, my father, a twenty-seven year member of the Soka Gakkai International, asked me if I was a Bodhisattva of the Earth. I thought he was asking me a trick question. My delayed response was a tentative “yes.” Then he asked if I knew what that was, and I told him, “No, but if it’s something good, then that’s what I am.”

When I finally learned the definition, I wasn’t sure if I should indeed be calling myself a bodhisattva, much less one that emerges from the earth. I was not in denial about the kind of person I was. It was difficult for me to truly care about other people because, through my eyes, the world was a place where only the strong survived. Looking out for others was not a part of my psyche. Other than family, who was looking out for me?

President Ikeda said, “Buddhism calls a person who embodies these qualities of wisdom, courage and compassion, who strives without cease for the happiness of others, a bodhisattva” (*SGI President Ikeda’s Addresses in the United States*, p. 65). The idea of living up to those lofty qualities didn’t quite fit into my exciting, yet highly self-centered, lifestyle. But now I had something to aim for. It was thrilling to know that I didn’t always have to be angry. The process would be difficult for me because I had to look deep inside myself for altruism.

The concept of bodhisattva is familiar to the practitioners of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism as the ninth of the Ten Worlds, a way that Buddhism explains life. It is defined as those who aspire to enlightenment and are fully awakened to their mission to help others do the same. Those in this state of life understand that to be completely happy, they must endeavor to remove the pain and suffering of others as well as lead them to happiness.

It is a human tendency that we spend our lives going back and forth between the six lower worlds, where we simply react to the environment around us. Moving up to the world of bodhisattva, and ideally enlightenment, requires tenacious effort on our part. Changing the way we live and think takes a realization of our dominant life condition and a strong determination to increase our potential for humanism—but we should take comfort in the fact that we *can* change.

I once spoke with a youth division member who, much like me, didn’t think she could possibly be a bodhisattva. She told me that she always thought of Buddhas and bodhisattvas as omnipotent beings who were not quite human. She envisioned them as nebulous figures who walked on water and floated through air.

Nothing could be further from the truth, although it’s understandable that some might feel this way, especially if they have read certain letters by Nichiren Daishonin. In “Letter to the Sage Nichimyo,” he tells the story of an ascetic, Aspiration for the Law, who peels off his skin to use as paper and rips out his bone for use as a writing utensil. He even mixes his marrow and blood to use as ink, all so he could share a verse of the sacred teaching with others.

In accounts of Shakyamuni’s previous existences, it is said that he used his body to fuel a thousand lanterns, fed his flesh to a leper and cast himself into a demon’s mouth. But don’t worry—no one will ask you to remove your skin to attain enlightenment. Ordinary people are not required to do such things. How we practice the correct teaching depends on the time and conditions in which we live. As the Daishonin says, “Of what use is it to

peel off our skin when the country has an abundant supply of paper?” (WND, 324).

These stories serve to illustrate the importance of having a seeking spirit and a practice devoted to enabling the enlightenment of others. It is not necessary to make such extreme sacrifices to attain enlightenment, but the lesson we can take from the stories is the dedication needed to practice correctly. In “The Gift of Rice,” the Daishonin explains, “Because these things are the affairs of worthies and sages, they are impossible for us to do” (WND, 1125). However, there are plenty of things we can do to display the bodhisattva within. For example, mothers and fathers express this state when they show unconditional love for their children and fiercely protect them from harm.

In a view that is a bit more contemporary, bodhisattvas are people who are wholeheartedly seeking enlightenment for themselves and others while challenging any obstacle that may confront them. In talking about the bodhisattva, Nichiren Daishonin says, “Those in the ninth world of Bodhisattva live among the ordinary people of the six paths and revere others more than themselves, giving goodness to others while reserving evil for themselves” (*Gosho Zenshu*, 433).

It’s clear from this passage that bodhisattvas are those who put the happiness of others before their own while devoting themselves to Buddhist practice with courage. Through this passage, the Daishonin invalidates the notion that a bodhisattva is someone special who lives apart from ordinary human beings.

It is interesting to note that each bodhisattva who appears in the Lotus Sutra has a name that corresponds to a special quality he or she possesses. For example, Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound contributes to the happiness of others through the beautiful music he performs, helping them tap the pure spirit they possess. Bodhisattva Medicine King represents the function of healing. In other words, we can choose to display whichever qualities of the bodhisattva that will help us fulfill our missions.

Those who practice Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism and share it with others establish the life condition of absolute happiness as Bodhisattvas of the Earth. A bodhisattva is not one of the statues you might see at a Buddhist temple. It is a condition inherent in our lives.

Bodhisattvas of the Earth have four virtues: true self, eternity, purity and happiness. These are developed through self-reformation. The virtue of true self is established by strengthening oneself to withstand difficulties, turning them into opportunities for growth. The virtue of eternity is to experience freedom, through believing in the eternity of life, and to work spontaneously toward the greater happiness of society. Purity is to demonstrate true wisdom and reason, unswayed by selfish desire or ego. Happiness means to live with great joy, securely founded on the creative power of life. These qualities are developed by tapping into the ‘earth’ of Buddhahood. Bodhisattvas of the Earth are truly humane, compassionate and joyful people. (*Basics of Buddhism*, p. 26)

Nichiren Daishonin equated the four virtues of the Buddha’s life to the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. Bodhisattva Superior Practices corresponds to true self, Boundless Practices to eternity, Pure Practices to purity and Firmly Established Practices to happiness. This suggests that the life condition of Buddhahood is expressed through the behavior of the bodhisattva.

Regarding Bodhisattvas of the Earth, President Ikeda also said, “Humanity today lacks hope and vision for the future. It is for precisely this reason that the Bodhisattvas of the Earth have appeared. Without your presence, the future of humanity would be bleak and

spiritual decline its destination” (July 12, 1996 *World Tribune*, p. 13). He is talking about every one of us who dedicates our lives to spreading joy in the places that we live and work and to creating peace for all humanity.

We are bodhisattvas when we do seemingly simple acts. Think of the time when a member went out of her way to comfort you during your pain. She is a bodhisattva. Or maybe someone sends you bits and pieces of President Ikeda’s guidance to encourage you. He, too, is a bodhisattva. Perhaps you have even done more than was deemed necessary to ensure the success of an activity. You are also a bodhisattva.

It is nothing other than strong faith in the Gohonzon that enables us to strengthen and expand our innate bodhisattva life condition. By exerting ourselves everyday in the essentials of faith, practice and study, we bring forth the qualities that we admire in others, the kinds of qualities that put the happiness of others in the forefront. When we practice strongly as Bodhisattvas of the Earth, we can say that, in essence, we are Buddhas bringing forth the power of the Mystic Law within. So yes, Dad, I can now answer with much more conviction that I am a Bodhisattva of the Earth.

*Partly based on Yasashii Kyogaku (Easy Buddhist Study), published by the Seikyo Press in 1994.*