

"Be the change you want to see" - Mahatma Gandhi

THE POWER OF ONE

"True human progress is not accomplished on a grand scale. It only takes place on the individual level." - Carl Hilty

"A great revolution of character in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a society, and further, will enable a change in the destiny of humankind." - Daisaku Ikeda

Introduction

For centuries, scholars have debated what forces shape human history. Some believe there are tides that are greater than any single individual, and that we are essentially helpless to change. Others contend that particular people who have appeared throughout the ages have powerfully influenced history. Perhaps there is a measure of truth in both of these views.

How different our world might be if the significant figures of history had never existed. Great conquerors and political leaders come to mind, who forged empires and established new ways of organizing societies, affecting the lives of millions – sometimes for the better, and sometimes for the worse.

Also influential are the scientists and artists who discovered so much about the laws of nature and expressed their discoveries in the advances of science, technology and culture.

But if we look deeper, we can see another, more influential force, underlying the major changes in human history. This force is derived from philosophy and religion, which have provided us with a framework for our essential values and the ways we have viewed our existence and its purpose. Even if we have no religion, what we are and what we become is a direct reflection of what we believe and what we revere.

Despite the multitude of accomplishments and changes wrought by humanity, whether individually or collectively, there still remain many serious problems. We still continue to suffer from the horrors of war, the devastation of poverty, illness and environmental collapse; and we still experience the desperation of living without finding answers to the mysteries of life and death. With all the advances of civilization, why has humanity not yet mastered these problems?



One man's quest for the meaning of existence

The philosophy of Buddhism is the result of one man's quest for the answers to questions of life and death, of suffering and happiness, and of the purpose of existence. Some 2,500 years ago, a young man named Siddhartha Gautama was born as a prince in India. He left his privileged life and undertook an odyssey into his own being. He sought and eventually attained a state of life of total oneness with the life force of the universe. This state was called enlightenment or Buddhahood. He began to be known as "the Buddha," meaning "one who is awakened [to the truth]." He was also called Shakyamuni, meaning "sage of the Shakya clan." This awakening was so profound that Shakyamuni devoted the rest of his life to teaching others the way to attain the same condition.

To what specifically did Shakyamuni become enlightened? First, that our lives and that of the universe are one, and that the phenomena of life and death are two inseparable aspects of an eternal existence that encompasses both the individual and the cosmos. He further realized that all phenomena are subject to change, and that only by perceiving this eternal oneness can we overcome the endless cycle of sufferings that result from our attachments to the things that are bound to change and eventually depart from us. Most important, Shakyamuni's enlightenment allowed him direct access to an energy and a level of wisdom he had never even dreamed of. He discovered that the essence of the universe, that fundamental intelligence that gives rise to life, is inherent in all life forms, including humans. Gaining access to this "universal self" or innate "Buddha nature" is the key to conquering all forms of suffering, achieving our ultimate potential and mastering our destiny – even beyond our present existence.

In his early teachings, Shakyamuni trained his followers to detach themselves from desires, which he taught were the source of suffering. In his later teachings, Shakyamuni revealed a more profound teaching: that true enlightenment was not to be found in detachment from the world, but rather in the development of the Buddha nature in the context of everyday life. Since all life, including that of the universe itself, is eternally coming into existence, developing, aging, and returning to non-existence, there is no such thing as permanent death. Just as energy cannot be created or destroyed, life, when seen as the expression of manifest energy, continues to re-emerge after a period of latency. The ultimate message of the Buddha is how to live an enlightened life here and now, and how to continue to expand this enlightenment from one lifetime to the next, with no boundaries into the eternal future.

This message is contained in a teaching known as the Lotus Sutra, which Shakyamuni taught in the last eight years of his life. The Lotus Sutra teaches that desires and even sufferings are the fuel, the motivation, for the manifestation of the Buddha nature. All desires and sufferings have an enlightened as well as a deluded aspect. When their enlightened aspects are harnessed through Buddhist practice, they can become the means by which we can develop our higher potential. For example, when the life force of the Buddha nature is awakened, selfish desires are transformed into compassionate desires, and problems become challenges rather than sufferings.

Since our lives, both physically and spiritually, are the products of the life of the greater universe, our bodies and minds possess the same qualities and abilities. Shakyamuni perceived this reality and exemplified it with his own life, but he left the specific means of attaining this state to another who would appear in the future. Shakyamuni predicted the appearance of a future Buddha who would clarify the direct path to enlightenment. Recognizing the difficulty of ensuring this essential teaching's survival in those ancient days, Shakyamuni helped his contemporaries attain enlightenment through their mentor/disciple relationships with him; but for the sake of the long-term future, he left the full realization of his message to this Buddha of the future.

The son of a fisherman in 13th-century Japan fulfilled Shakyamuni's predictions. On April 28, 1253, a monk who called himself Nichiren (meaning "sun-lotus") chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo for the first time, declaring that this, the title of the Lotus Sutra, is the essential teaching that can enable any person to directly manifest the state of Buddhahood. Nichiren came to be known as "Daishonin," meaning "great sage." He is regarded as the Buddha of the essential teaching whose appearance was predicted by Shakyamuni. In his first written teaching, *On Attaining Buddhahood in this Lifetime*, Nichiren Daishonin stated:

If you wish to free yourself from the sufferings of birth and death you have endured since time without beginning and attain without fail unsurpassed enlightenment in this lifetime, you must perceive the mystic truth that is originally inherent in all living beings. This truth is Myoho-renge-kyo. Chanting Myoho-renge-kyo will therefore enable you to grasp the mystic truth innate in all life.

(The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, p. 3)



Nichiren added the word *nam*, which means “to devote oneself” to the title *Myoho-renge-kyo*. He specified that when we invoke this phrase by chanting it aloud we awaken the Buddha nature in the depths of our consciousness. Even though *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* may be unfamiliar to us, we can begin to understand how it works if we consider the eternal nature of our lives, which share a spiritual bond with the Buddha who thus named the true aspect of all phenomena. Just as one’s name embodies all the characteristics of one’s self, so does *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* embody the Buddha nature, which instinctively responds when summoned.

The meaning of *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*

Nam is derived from the Sanskrit *namas*, which means devotion of body and mind, and returning one’s life to its source.

Myoho means “Mystic Law.” *Myo*, or “mystic” refers to the essential, innate and enlightened aspect of life, while *ho* or “law” represents the discernable, but deluded aspect. *Ho* also corresponds to the appearance of life in physical form, while *myo* is the invisible, latent aspect, which we call death. The two are inseparable aspects of the one eternal and unchanging reality of life. When the enlightened aspect finds expression in the manifest self, we can experience enlightenment in our present existence and continue to expand it in every future life.

Renge literally means “lotus flower,” which symbolizes the simultaneous nature of cause and effect. All phenomena in the universe operate through the law of cause and effect. It is simultaneous because the potential effect is created at the same instant in which the cause is made. The lotus flower demonstrates this dynamic principle by producing its flower and seedpod at the same time.

Myoho-renge thereby embodies the essential nature of life and death (*myoho*) and the principle by which it operates (*renge*).

Kyo means “sutra” or “teaching.” It is the voice of the Buddha, and represents the “thread” of life that travels through sound and vibration. It also represents the three existences of past, present and future. In other words, *kyo* is the expression of *myoho-renge* through time and space.

Life changes at every moment

We possess the potential for every conceivable kind of experience at every moment. At one moment we are happy, at another we are angry or sad – usually depending on our reactions to changing circumstances. As Shakyamuni taught, our dependence on changing circumstances for our happiness makes us slaves to those circumstances. The solution, however, is not to detach ourselves from life; for even if it were possible, such an attitude toward life would diminish our humanity, and the goal is to develop our humanity.

The key to unconditional, absolute happiness is the development of our innate strength and wisdom, which can master our state of life from within, regardless of circumstances. The source of this strength and wisdom is the Buddha nature, the highest of the so-called “Ten Worlds” – ten states that describe our condition of life at any given moment. The lowest of these ten life states is hell, a condition of utter despair. The lower four states describe our self-centred egoistic tendencies, while the fifth is a neutral state of tranquility, where reflection is possible. The four higher worlds represent our aspirations to become wiser and more compassionate, culminating in Buddhahood. The Ten Worlds cover the spectrum of human experience, from the helpless and desperate to the totally enlightened and emancipated. The Ten Worlds also exist in all life forms, as well as the environment. Nichiren describes it as follows:

Life at each moment encompasses the body and mind and the self and environment of all sentient beings in the three thousand realms, including plants, sky, earth, and even the minutest particles of dust. Life at each moment permeates the entire realm of phenomena and is revealed in all phenomena. To be awakened to this principle is itself the mutually inclusive relationship of life at each moment and all phenomena.
(Writings, p. 3)

What does this mean in terms of real life? It means that, when we awaken our higher potential through chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we are able to actually change the way we feel at any given moment, like a generator producing an electrical current. The implications of applying this process are immense. To be able to transform a state of suffering and confusion into a state of positive energy and clarity essentially means that we can master our inner lives, even when our circumstances are stressful. This ability liberates us spiritually, providing us with the confidence and wisdom to transform those negative circumstances. Buddhism does not teach us to simply accept our problems and make the best

of them. It teaches us that we must first cause our higher self to come to life. Then, from a position of strength and wisdom, we can exert a powerful positive influence over our bodies and minds, and extend this influence to our environment. This is the principle of “human revolution.” Nichiren Daishonin further explains:



When deluded, one is called an ordinary being, but when enlightened, one is called a Buddha. This is similar to a tarnished mirror [mirrors were made of polished metal] that will shine like a jewel when polished. A mind now clouded by the illusions of the innate darkness of life is like a tarnished mirror, but when polished, it is sure to become like a clear mirror, reflecting the essential nature of phenomena and the true aspect of reality. Arouse deep faith, and diligently polish your mirror day and night. How should you polish it? Only by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. (*Writings*, p. 4)

Human Revolution – One person can change the world

In the time of Nichiren Daishonin in 13th-century Japan, the teachings of Buddhism had become confused and numerous splinter sects arose, each deriving its base from partial teachings and thus leading people away from the Lotus Sutra and its message of attaining enlightenment in this life. The ruling authorities corrupted Buddhist priests in order to maintain their power over the populace. In exchange for the government’s patronage, the clergy were induced to use their influence over the lower classes to make them obedient and unquestioning. Part of this strategy was to support Buddhist schools of the time that taught that one’s destiny was fixed in this lifetime, and that people should direct their prayers to an afterlife where they would be relieved of their sufferings. They told people to disregard the Lotus Sutra, as it was too difficult to understand. Yet Shakyamuni had encouraged his disciples to embrace the Lotus Sutra and to “honestly discard” his earlier teachings, which were temporary and partial.

Nichiren Daishonin spoke out, declaring the right and the ability of all people to challenge their destiny. Feeling threatened by this truth, religious and secular authorities persecuted the Daishonin and his followers, sending him into exile

twice and making numerous attempts on his life.

Despite these constant persecutions and a life of poverty and hardship, Nichiren Daishonin prevailed and his strongest disciples also upheld their convictions. After his passing in 1282, his teachings survived but did not spread widely until the middle of the 20th century, in the wake of the Second World War.

In 1928, some 700 years after the birth of Nichiren, an educator named Tsunesaburo Makiguchi learned of Nichiren's teachings from a colleague. Makiguchi had developed a philosophy of life he termed *soka*, meaning "value creation." He applied this philosophy to education, and developed it into a system of student-centred pedagogy, which encouraged children to think for themselves – in marked contrast to the highly authoritarian education system of Japan at the time. Makiguchi discovered that the Buddhist philosophy taught by Nichiren held the key to actualizing value creation in daily life. Together with his closest associate, Josei Toda, Makiguchi founded an educators' society called the Soka Kyoiku Gakkai (society of educators for the creation of value). By the beginning of World War II, the organization had reached a membership of 3,000. The group gathered to discuss both education and Buddhism.

As Japan's imperialistic ambitions rose in Asia, the military government commanded all religious denominations to participate in the war effort by establishing State Shinto, a distorted version of Japan's ancient religion. It demanded worship of the emperor as the descendant of the sun goddess, in order to unite the nation in carrying out its war of aggression. As in the time of Nichiren Daishonin, the government was attempting to use religion to further its own agenda.

Makiguchi was one of the few voices that were raised in protest. In retaliation, the government arrested 20 of the leaders of the Soka Kyoiku Gakkai and imprisoned them as "thought criminals." All but two of them recanted their faith and were released. Only Makiguchi and Toda refused, and remained in prison. After nearly two years, Makiguchi, already in his 70s, died as a result of the prison conditions. Toda, who was kept in isolation, managed to survive, although his health was irreparably damaged.

During his ordeal in prison, Toda began to practise chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo and studying the Lotus Sutra with increasing intensity. He reached a profound realization in the depths of his consciousness – that the Buddha



is life itself. This experience transformed his entire being, and was the seminal moment of a revival of the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin in the modern world.

Toda resolved to dedicate his life to carrying on the work of his mentor, Makiguchi. On his release from prison on July 3, 1945, he began to rebuild the organization, renaming it Soka Gakkai (society for the creation of value) and redefining its purpose as a broad-based movement in society, rather than an organization aimed only at educators.

As he began to write of his experience in prison, Toda came up with a modern-day expression for the state of enlightenment. He called it the “human revolution” – the opening of one’s ultimate human potential from within, enabling a transformation of one’s personal destiny toward absolute happiness and, through its wider application, toward a healthier society and world peace.

Freedom of religion had been established for the first time in Japan’s history, thanks to the new constitution brought by the Allied forces after the war. Toda traveled throughout Japan and the Soka Gakkai grew rapidly under his leadership. Many whose lives had been crushed by the war found renewed hope in the powerful life-philosophy of Nichiren Buddhism.

Among the many disillusioned young people who embraced Toda’s vision of a world without war was a 19-year-old youth named Daisaku Ikeda. The young Ikeda, who had lost a brother in the war, saw in Toda a man who embodied the ideals to which he aspired, and who was able to answer his questions about life and society with a clarity and level of insight he had never encountered before. Although weakened by tuberculosis, Ikeda, on becoming a member of the Soka Gakkai and learning more about the philosophy, resolved to join Toda in his quest to relieve people of their sufferings.

Unable to afford a university education, Ikeda studied with Toda, who was an accomplished scholar in a number of fields. Toda trained his young disciple rigorously, and Ikeda absorbed his mentor’s strict yet compassionate teaching with every fibre of his being. As a result, he became the driving force for the Soka Gakkai’s monumental growth through the 1950s. At the time of Toda’s death in 1958, more than 750,000 families had joined the Soka Gakkai – thus fulfilling a vow Toda had made on the day of his inauguration in 1951. The “human revolution” became synonymous with the movement that had arisen from the life and efforts of a single human being.

In 1960, Daisaku Ikeda was inaugurated as the third president of the Soka Gakkai. In that year, he began to travel overseas, initiating the worldwide spread of Nichiren Buddhism. In 1975, the Soka Gakkai International was established, and Ikeda was appointed president. Today, more than 12 million people are practising in 185 countries and territories.

Peace, Culture & Education

Buddhism is a pacifist philosophy that absolutely rejects violence and discrimination. A Buddha is an enlightened human being, not a god or something greater than human life. One of Nichiren Daishonin's writings states:

Life is the foremost of all treasures. It is expounded that even the treasures of the entire major world system [universe] cannot equal the value of one's body and life.
(Writings, p. 1125)

The Lotus Sutra also states:

**At all times I think to myself:
How can I cause living beings
To gain entry into the unsurpassed way
And quickly acquire the body of a Buddha?**
(Lotus Sutra, chap. 16, p. 232)

A Buddha is one who has manifested the three enlightened virtues of sovereign, parent and teacher, which can be considered the greatest of human qualities arising from compassion and wisdom. The virtue of sovereign means the ability to protect people from harm, and this virtue corresponds to the goal of peace. The virtue of parent is that of nurturing, which corresponds to culture, as in the cultivation of one's humanity – for it is from one's parents that a person acquires one's sense of humanity. And the virtue of teacher corresponds to education. The three ideals of peace, culture and education can thus be regarded as universal values shared by humankind. They form the three pillars of the SGI organization and its philosophy.

These ideals can be practised in daily life and in every field of endeavour. They express the truth that ultimate human happiness can never be attained at the expense of others' happiness. In reality, no one person can be completely satisfied knowing that others continue to suffer. Buddhist practice is therefore always directed toward both self and others. This means two things for the individual: each of us deserves happiness as much as anyone else; and our own happiness is enlarged by the happiness of others.

When we open the Buddha nature within our lives, we awaken both the joy of

our own existence as well as the desire to help others become happy. The extent to which this principle can extend is limitless. This means that the potential of a single person to change the world is also unlimited.

Each of us has a history that extends far beyond the present life. We have arrived where we are now as the result of the accumulation of causes made throughout all of our previous existences. This also applies to our common future as humans on this earth. Our future is determined by the nature and the strength of the causes we make in the present, which, if powerful enough, can change the course of history. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo reaches the innermost depths of human consciousness and causes an immeasurable power to awaken and operate in our lives. As Daisaku Ikeda describes in his poem, *A Rainbow Over Niagara*:

**One person is not simply one person;
One person's power can reach far beyond that single life.
A human being's unrevealed potential
Is boundless and inexhaustible.**





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