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Flow of Buddhism

After Shakyamuni Buddha's passing (around 500-600 B.C.E.), Buddhism developed along two main divisions called Theravada and Mahayana. Theravada Buddhism that emphasizes monastic practices, spread southward from India to Sri-Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. Mahayana Buddhism that emphasizes the wide popular practice of Buddhism among laity spread northward to China, Korea and Japan.

Mahayana Buddhism spread to China through Central Asia along the Silk Road, between the first century B.C.E and first century C.E. In this process of propagation, while the philosophical core of Buddhism remained consistent, various adaptations to the cultures and customs, and various shifts in doctrinal emphasis took place in the new environments. In time, a distinctive form of Chinese Buddhism evolved, and various schools of Chinese Buddhism came to be established. One such major school was the T'ien-t'ai School.

From China, through Korea, Buddhism found its way to Japan, at about the middle of the sixth century. Despite her native faith in Shinto, government officials and the upper classes soon patronised this new religion for what they believed it could ensure – personal safety and well-being of the state. Among the Buddhist schools introduced to Japan, the people found a strong appeal in the belief in Amida Buddha or the Pure Land Sect.

The social and political climate, coupled with the frequent occurrences of natural disasters such as famines and epidemics, in Japan at the time created an environment

of pessimism, fear, insecurity and desperation. The people found their source of hope in the promise of an after-world paradise of the Pure Land.

While Pure Land Sect took a stronghold among the populace, Zen Buddhism that teaches the way of meditation to reach enlightenment appealed to the warrior class of samurais, the class that rose to power with the decline of the imperial court.

What is Nichiren Buddhism?

The Nichiren School founded in Japan by 13th-century Buddhist priest Nichiren, belongs to the Mahayana stream of Buddhism.

The doctrines of Nichiren Buddhism are derived from the Lotus Sutra widely regarded to be Shakyamuni Buddha's most definitive teaching. Nichiren (1222 - 1282) taught that the core teaching of the Lotus Sutra is to be found in its title Myoho-Renge-Kyo, which expresses as the universal Law underlying all phenomena. Nichiren also emphasized that the key teaching in the Lotus Sutra is the Buddha's revelation that all people can develop a life state similar to his own, called the Buddha nature or Buddhahood.

Nichiren established a practice of chanting the phrase Nam-myoho-rengekyo, an invocation that brings the individual in harmony with the universal Law, and thus unlocks the potentiality of an enhanced self empowered with wisdom and life force characteristic of the Buddha nature. Besides, Nichiren taught that this personal practice for one's happiness should be complemented with one's selfless act in enabling others to awaken likewise to their innate potential, an act that is synonymous with the Buddha's compassion.

Life of Nichiren Daishonin

Nichiren Buddhism was founded by the Great Sage (Daishonin) Nichiren (1222-1282). Nichiren was born Zennichi-marō, the son of a fisherman on February 16, 1222. At twelve, his parents sent him to Seicho-ji temple for Buddhist and secular education. At that young age, Zennichi-marō began to cherish a great wish to become the wisest man in Japan to seek answer to human suffering.

Seicho-ji belonged to T'ien-t'ai School and Zennichi-marō studied the T'ien-t'ai teachings as well as that of the prevailing schools. At age sixteen, he chose the way of priesthood and was ordained Zesho-bo Rencho. From then on, he devoted himself to studying all the Buddhist scriptures. His pursuit brought him to the Kamakura city where the headquarters of the military government was situated, and subsequently to major centres of Buddhist learning in the Kyoto and Nara areas.

His 10 years of intensive study led him to the conclusion that the highest of the Buddha's teachings is the Lotus Sutra which contains the truth of enlightenment for all in the Latter Day of the Law. He also grew convinced that his was the mission of Bodhisattva Jogyo who, in the Lotus Sutra, was entrusted with the task of propagating the correct teaching in the Latter Day.

At age 32, he returned to Seicho-ji to prepare for the proclamation of the correct practice of Buddhism. Early on the morning of April 28, 1253, he invoked for the first time ever the phrase, “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo”, the essence of the Lotus Sutra, and the teaching that can lead all people to enlightenment in the Latter Day. He renamed himself Nichiren, meaning “sun-lotus.”

Nichiren was determined to denounce the misconceptions of the prevailing sects openly. Specifically he predicted that Japan would not be able to rid herself of sufferings brought about by internal strife and foreign invasion if she were to subscribe to partial or misleading teachings. Such persistent efforts in propounding the supremacy of the Lotus Sutra were only to bring him persecutions one after another that the Lotus Sutra predicts its votary will experience.

The four leading sects of the time were Nembutsu, Zen, Shingon and Ritsu, patronised by people of nobility and those in power. Thus began a series of persecutions upon Nichiren that led to him being attacked at his cottage (Matsubagayatsu Persecution, August 1260); exiled to Izu Peninsular (Izu Exile, May 1261); ambushed and attacked (Komatsubara Persecution, November 1264); sentenced for execution (Tatsunokuchi Persecution, September 1271); exiled to Sado Island (October 1271).

The near-execution at Tatsunokuchi was the point where Nichiren relinquished his transient status as Bodhisattva Jogyo, and revealed his true identity as the original Buddha since time without beginning, who is one with the supreme Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

It was on Sado Island, in the midst of the harshest persecution that was equivalent of a death sentence, that the Great Sage Nichiren wrote some of his most important writings, including The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind and The Opening of the Eyes.

Nichiren Daishonin was pardoned only later when his predictions of internal strife (power struggle within the ruling Hojo clan) and foreign invasion (threats of Mongol invasion) came true. After his final remonstrations (in all, Nichiren had made three remonstrations) with the government went unheeded, he decided to retire to Mount Minobu in 1274 where he concentrated his efforts into writing for posterity and training his disciples.

While in Minobu, Nichiren Daishonin entrusted propagation activities to his closest disciple Nikko. Nikko’s leadership won many converts among priests and lay people at a place called Atsuhara Village. Priests of a T’ien-t’ai temple began harassing the converts and exerted official pressure to arrest on false charges 20 peasant farmers. The farmers were tortured and subsequently three were beheaded for refusing to abandon faith in the Mystic Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

The Atsuhara Persecution made Nichiren Daishonin convinced that lay disciples are now strong enough to uphold and protect the Correct Teaching. This led him to inscribe the Dai-Gohonzon (Supreme Object of Devotion) for humanity on October 12, 1279.

By 1282, the Daishonin was in failing health. Feeling that death was near, in September, he wrote a transfer document where he designated Nikko as his legitimate successor to continue the propagation of True Buddhism. On October 8, he named Nissho, Nichiro, Nikko, Niko, Nitcho and Nichiji as the six elder priests.

On October 13, Nichiren Daishonin wrote another transfer document transferring the position of high priest of Kuon-ji at Minobu to Nikko, thus appointing Nikko as Second High Priest.

Nichiren passed away peacefully that day at age 61, at the residence of believer Ikegami Munenaka, three years and one day after inscription of the Dai-Gohonzon, and completing a life devoted to the propagation of Buddhism for humanity.

The Object of Devotion

Nichiren expressed his own enlightenment in the inscription of a mandala called the Gohonzon (fundamental object of devotion), replicas of which are placed in believers' homes for daily Buddhist practice. In establishing a practice that is easily accessible to all people regardless of ethnicity and gender, a practice that translates the Buddha's intention for all people to gain enlightenment into daily reality, Nichiren has made the ancient Buddhist teachings relevant to contemporary life. For this, believers of Nichiren Buddhism respectfully refer to him as Nichiren Daishonin (the Great Saint Nichiren) and regard him as the Buddha who restored the spirit of the 2,500 year-old religion to its original intent.

Law of Cause and Effect

A most important premise in the Buddhist philosophy is that the course of one's life, generally called destiny is self-determined. Underlying this premise is the concept of karma, a resultant condition arising from the causes one make in life.

Buddhism teaches that the Law of cause and effect is a universal law underlying all phenomena in the universe. The causes and effects one accumulates in life covers not just the present lifetime but the three existences of past, present and future. This is Buddhism's view of eternal life.

Causes may be negative or positive, and they are accumulated through our thoughts, words and deeds. What we are now is the result of past causes made. By the same reason then, what will become of us depends on the causes that we are making now.

Besides, Buddhism also reveals the principle of simultaneity of cause and effect, though there may be a lapse of time before effect is manifest.

Thus, what matters most is the continued effort in laying positive causes, cherishing the present moment as the turning point in life.

Human Revolution

The core philosophy of Nichiren Buddhism can be summed up by the concept of “human revolution”. In essence, this implies that the self-motivated inner change of even a single individual positively affects the larger web of life.

Upon practising Nichiren Buddhism, believers find themselves pro-active in taking responsibility over the circumstances and direction of their life. Gone is the defeatist attitude of subjecting oneself to a predestined course of life.

This revitalized and self-empowering experience is in fact always related by believers as the actual proof of hope, courage and confidence they have regained of themselves after starting to practise Buddhism.

The belief that one can change one’s negative circumstances and the ability to do so is the first step on the road to self-reformation or human revolution.

Ten States of Life

The boundless potential and life force in each individual is explained by the Buddhist concept of the Ten Worlds, a term referring to the ten different states of life condition every person can experience alike. The principle of Ten Worlds reveals the dynamic changes life experiences at each moment.

The ten life states are namely:-

HELL This is a state of suffering and despair, in which we perceive we have no freedom of action.

It is characterised by the impulse to destroy ourselves and everything around us.

HUNGER This is a state of being controlled by insatiable desire for money, power, status, or whatever. While desires are inherent in any of the ten worlds, in this state we are at the mercy of our cravings and cannot control them.

ANIMALITY This is a state where we are ruled by instinct. We exhibit neither reason nor moral

sense nor the ability to make judgement. In this state, we operate by the law of the jungle, and we take advantage of the weak while fawning on the strong.

ANGER A selfish, greedy, distorted ego that is determined to best others at all costs and seeing everything as a potential threat to oneself. In this state, we value only ourselves and tend to hold others in contempt. A sense of self-importance and superiority rules to the point that we cannot accept anyone who exceeds us.

Hell, Hunger, Animality and Anger are collectively called the four evil paths.

HUMANITY A seemingly calm and passive state of life, but vulnerable to the lower four worlds and external influences.

HEAVEN A sense of intense joy stemming from the fulfilment of desires, a sense of physical well-being, or inner contentment. Joy experienced is short-lived and vulnerable to external influences.

The above six states are called the six paths or six lower worlds. Their common characteristic is that their emergence or subsidence is governed largely by eternal circumstances.

In fact, many people experience their vulnerability to the environment to the point that they lost control of themselves and find that they are bound by destiny.

A life shuttling back and forth the six lower worlds experiences happiness only in a superficial way, that is subject to whether the factors that bring happiness are present or not. Buddhism terms this relative happiness.

LEARNING This state is where one seeks the truth through the teachings or experience of others.

REALIZATION This state is similar to Learning, except that one seeks the truth not through others' teachings but through one's own direct perception of the world.

We begin to move on a higher plane of Learning and Realisation when we come to realise that the experiences in the six lower paths is impermanent. That is where we begin to seek some lasting truth in life. At these stages, one's life somehow gains a certain degree of independence or self control and is no longer prisoner to external changes.

However, people in Learning and Realisation somehow tend to be contemptuous of people in the six paths who have not reached this understanding.

Besides, the search for truth is primarily self-oriented; hence, there is a potential and tendency for egotism, arrogance and self-satisfaction. Buddhism refers to these two states as the 'two vehicles' referring to people who have ceased to progress to the higher states of Bodhisattva and Buddhahood.

BODHISATTVA Bodhisattvas are those who aspire to achieve enlightenment and at the same time are equally determined to enable fellow beings to do the same. People in this state have an awareness of their greater self which encompasses others in their environment.

Hence, their understanding of happiness is not own happiness but shared happiness. The experience of happiness and fulfilment is derived from altruistic actions of helping others.

The states from Hell to Bodhisattva are sometimes collectively termed "the nine worlds" referring to common people who are aspiring the Buddhist way.

BUDDHAHOOD This is a dynamic state of life condition where one is enlightened to the ultimate truth of life and enjoys a state of spiritual freedom. People in the life state of Buddhahood will possess qualities such as wisdom, compassion and life force.

Mutual Possession of Ten Worlds Attaining Buddhahood

The classification of the Ten Worlds is meant to describe the different characteristics and experiences life undergoes. In reality, life functions dynamically at each moment, fluctuating among the ten different states, with each state being a potential for change. This is expressed as the principle of the mutual possession of the ten worlds -- a concept that each of the ten worlds possesses all ten within itself.

For example, a person who is in the state of Hell now may, at the next moment, either remain in the same state or manifest any of the other nine. The important implication in this principle is that all people, in whatever state of life, have the potential to manifest Buddhahood.

The principle of the mutual possession of the ten worlds is thus a hope-filled teaching of the Buddha, inspiring hope and courage in people who have resigned to their fate of suffering.

From a different perspective, the state of Buddhahood is not a final destination one reaches. If we understand the characteristics of life in the state of Buddhahood clearly, we will detect that wisdom, compassion, endurance, vitality are all traits that are forged when one faces the difficulties and challenges in life. Therefore, Buddhahood is found or experienced only within the realities of life, or life in the other nine worlds.

A Buddha is thus an ordinary person who strives to walk the highest path of a human being in the midst of daily realities. This is the principle of attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime that is taught by Nichiren Daishonin.

The purpose of Buddhist practice is to enable one to ceaselessly elevate one's life condition to establish Buddhahood as one's fundamental and basic life-tendency, without eradicating the nine worlds which is impossible in the first place. This is the path of self-development and human revolution that all believers in Nichiren Buddhism endeavour to realize.

Buddha Nature is Inherent in Everyone

Buddhahood is defined as the highest state of life condition characterized by wisdom, hope, courage, confidence, compassion, vitality and endurance. These are traits forming a spiritual strength that enables people to live truly as human beings regardless of changes and challenges of the times and of society.

Guided fundamentally by wisdom, one will be able to enhance his concept of the value of good as against evil, and will thus actively direct his or her life on the path of

good. Tapping into these inner resources in the course of our daily life is equivalent to walking the way of a true human being, and is also the way of the Buddha.

The practice of Buddhism thus teaches one to live a life of value, the value of greatest good, or to take daily actions to create value in his life.

Buddhism also teaches that the greatest value is derived out of compassion; that is, a desire to help others as well to realize the follies of the human heart and seek the way of the true human being.

Happiness for One and All

Altruism is a core spirit of Buddhism. Looking beyond the smaller self, which by nature engages oneself in selfish desires and pursuits, and living on a higher plane of the larger self that looks beyond one's own concerns and needs to consider the needs of other people.

Buddhism teaches that this inner reformation of the individual is most important. A change in one's perspectives towards life, towards the concept of good, towards positive values in life, will propel one on the course of leading a life of fulfilment, bringing us back full-circle to the pursuit of happiness being the one great desire of mankind. And happiness is now identified as shared happiness, and not own happiness.

A value-creative life is thus one which brings happiness to oneself, to one's immediate family, and people in the community. And by natural expansion of the human network, this will affect society at large and the world.

Therefore, at the heart of Buddhism lies a most powerful living principle for changing one's life and bringing peace to society.

How Do I Get Started?

The Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin is presently practised by some 12 million believers around the world, associated with an organization called the Soka Gakkai International (SGI) The SGI was established in 1975 under the leadership of its founding and present president, Daisaku Ikeda, as a movement for the promotion of peace, culture and education based on the Buddhist principle of respect for the dignity of life.

SGI has member-organisations in 190 countries. SSA was registered locally in 1972. Besides conducting activities and programmes to encourage the study and practice of Nichiren Buddhism, SSA also carries out community services, educational and cultural programmes, to foster social harmony and progress based on the Buddhist spirit of value-creation.

Anyone who wishes to learn more about Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and the activities of the Soka Association will be invited to discussion meetings, small

gatherings of SSA members and friends where dialogue centres round the application of the Buddhist philosophy to various

life situations. Lectures and seminars on Buddhist doctrines are also open to all, believers and non-believers alike.

A new believer is encouraged to practise the daily chanting of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo first, before he or she progresses to learn the recitation from the Lotus Sutra after gaining a deeper understanding and appreciation of his or her new found faith.