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Key Passages from *The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings*

[12] "The Life Span of the Thus Come One" Chapter—Part 2 [of 3]

A Sublime State of Being Where We Experience Joy in Both Life and Death

Throughout the long history of humankind, the nature of life and death has been the question of greatest concern for all philosophies and religions, East and West.

Buddhism, too, was born from an intense spiritual struggle to overcome the sufferings of birth, aging, sickness, and death, as symbolized by the account of Shakyamuni's four meetings.¹

Nichiren Daishonin, from an early age, deeply pondered the meaning of life and death. (...)

Nichiren Buddhism promotes a profound view of the inner nature of our lives and a keen and penetrating understanding of life and death, transforming all dread and trepidation about death into a fearless, straightforward view of reality that results in taking joy in both life and death. The section of *The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings* we will study in this installment offers a full and complete presentation of this unexcelled, eye-opening view of life and death.

[Chapter Sixteen: The Life Span of the Thus Come One *Twenty-seven important points*]

Point Four, regarding the passage "The Thus Come One perceives the true aspect of the threefold world exactly as it is. There is (u) no (mu) ebb or flow of birth and death, and there is no existing in this world and later entering extinction."

The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings says: The "Thus Come One"² is the living beings of the threefold world.³ When we look at these living beings through the eyes of the "Life Span" chapter, we can see and understand the true aspect of these beings who in their original states possess the Ten Worlds.⁴

¹ Four meetings: The four encounters Shakyamuni had as the prince Siddhartha that awakened him to the sufferings of birth, aging, sickness, and death. One day on a pleasure outing, he emerged from the palace through the east gate and saw someone withered with age. On another occasion, he emerged from the southern gate on and saw a sick person. A third time, going out from the western gate, he saw a corpse. Finally, going out through the northern gate, he encountered a religious ascetic.

² Thus Come One: One of the ten honorable titles of a Buddha, meaning one who has come from the realm of truth. This title indicates that a Buddha embodies the fundamental truth of all phenomena and has grasped the law of causality spanning past, present, and future.

³ Threefold world: The world of unenlightened beings who transmigrate within the six paths (the realms from hell through heavenly beings). The threefold world consists of, in ascending order, the world of desire, the world of form, and the world of formlessness. In a general sense, it refers to the saha world in which we dwell.

⁴ Ten Worlds: They are the realms of hell, hungry spirits, animals, asuras, human beings, heavenly beings, voice-hearers, cause-awakened ones, bodhisattvas, and Buddhas. They are also referred to as the ten life states of hell, hunger, animality, anger, humanity, heaven, learning, realization, bodhisattva, and Buddhahood.

The aspect or characteristics of the threefold world are birth, aging, sickness, and death. But if we look at birth and death in terms of their true nature, then there is no birth or death. And if there is no birth or death, then there is no ebb or flow. Not only do birth and death not exist. To look on birth and death with repulsion and try to escape from them is termed delusion, or a viewpoint of acquired enlightenment. Seeing and understanding the originally inherent nature of birth and death is termed awakening, or original enlightenment.⁵

Now when Nichiren and his followers chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, they realize the originally inherent nature of birth and death, and the originally inherent nature of ebb and flow. (OTT, 127)

This Saha World Is the Eternal Land of Tranquil Light

Let us begin by reconfirming the core truth of the “Life Span” chapter.⁶ It reveals that Shakyamuni in fact first attained enlightenment not under the bodhi tree in his present life in India, but in the remote past, numberless major world system dust particle kalpas ago.⁷ But that is not the only important teaching of this chapter.

It also discloses that Shakyamuni has been expounding the Law and guiding living beings to enlightenment here in this saha world⁸ from the remote past and will continue doing so into the eternal future.⁹ The true Land of Tranquil Light¹⁰ is not a land separate from this one, it exists

⁵ “Acquired enlightenment” is used in contrast with “original enlightenment.” According to the doctrine of original enlightenment, enlightenment is not something that one acquires through religious practice but something that exists in one’s original state of life. From this viewpoint, “acquired enlightenment” falls into the category of delusion, not true enlightenment.

⁶ After Shakyamuni’s attainment of enlightenment in the remote past, numberless major world system dust particle kalpas ago, is revealed in the “Life Span” (16th) chapter, the sutra goes on to state that Shakyamuni has always dwelled in this saha world teaching and converting living beings since then. It also states that Shakyamuni has employed numerous expedient means, in both this world and others where he teaches, based on the capacities of the living beings there. In his tireless efforts to teach and convert them, he employs many similes and parables and relies on many causes and conditions. Shakyamuni also explains that, though he has always dwelled in this land, to cause living beings to seek him and his teaching he adopts the tactic of “appearing to enter nirvana as an expedient means” (see LSOC16, 271).

⁷ The sutras prior to the Lotus Sutra and the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra (the first 14 chapters) teach that after many lifetimes of practice Shakyamuni first attained enlightenment sometime from the age of 30 to 35 under the bodhi tree outside the city of Gaya (later Bodhgaya) in India. This is known as acquired enlightenment. But the “Life Span” chapter of the Lotus Sutra reveals that Shakyamuni attained Buddhahood in the remote past, which is known as original enlightenment.

⁸ Saha world: This world, which is full of suffering. Often translated as the world of endurance. In Sanskrit, saha derives from a root meaning “to bear” or “to endure.” For this reason, in the Chinese versions of Buddhist scriptures, saha is rendered as endurance.

⁹ The “Life Span” chapter states: “I have been constantly in this saha world, preaching the Law, teaching, and converting” (LSOC16, 266).

¹⁰ Land of Tranquil Light: Also, Land of Eternally Tranquil Light. The Buddha land, which is free from impermanence and impurity. In many sutras, the actual saha world in which human beings dwell is described as an impure land filled with delusions and sufferings, while the Buddha land is described as a pure land free from these and far removed from this saha world. In contrast, the Lotus Sutra reveals the saha world to be the Buddha land, or the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light, and explains that the nature of a land is determined by the minds of its inhabitants.

nowhere but in the saha world in which we dwell. This is a major change from teachings in previous Buddhist scriptures about attaining Buddhahood and the nature of the land or our world.¹¹ (...)

It was Nichiren Daishonin, the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law, who revealed this fundamental Law that Shakyamuni practiced to attain enlightenment.

The “Life Span” chapter also indicates that the eternal Buddha undergoes birth and death as an ordinary human being. It explains that when this Buddha who eternally leads people to enlightenment dies, it is merely a case of “appearing to enter nirvana as an expedient means” (see LSOC16, 271).¹²

This answers the question why the eternal Buddha dies. By entering nirvana (dying), the Buddha arouses in people’s lives the innate spirit of faith, inspiring them to seek the Buddha and the Law.

The “Life Span” chapter’s ultimate intent is to lead ordinary people to enlightenment. Its fundamental aim is to teach and convert living beings and help them attain Buddhahood. (...)

For their part, living beings respond by rousing deep faith to seek the way and to practice the Buddha’s teachings. This eventually leads them to bring forth their inherent Buddhahood and transform the place where they are into the pure land of Eagle Peak.¹³ The “Life Span” chapter is indeed a teaching of the oneness of mentor and disciple. This section of *The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings* illuminates how mentor and disciple respond to each other and work together to realize their shared vow, living with a boundless awareness grounded in life’s eternity.

The Lotus Sutra passage the Daishonin comments on here opens with the words “The Thus Come One perceives the true aspect of the threefold world exactly as it is” (LSOC16, 267).¹⁴

The wisdom of the Buddha is the wisdom of enlightenment that surveys the world as it truly is. The Buddha perceives the true aspect of all universal phenomena. (...)

In *The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings*, the Daishonin says: “The ‘Thus Come One’ is the living beings of the threefold world” (OTT, 127). In other words, he declares that we ordinary people living in this corrupt and evil age are actually Buddhas.

Through the eyes of the Buddha, through the eyes of the “Life Span” chapter, the living beings of the threefold world, in their present form, are inherently Buddhas. The ultimate and most profound teaching of Buddhism is here revealed: Everyone is originally a Buddha, and we ourselves are the eternal Buddha.

The Daishonin says: “When we look at these living beings through the eyes of the ‘Life Span’ chapter, we can see and understand the true aspect of these beings who in their original states possess the Ten Worlds” (OTT, 127). (...)

All living beings—whoever they are and whatever world or life state they reside in—equally possess the Ten Worlds. That naturally means that they possess the world of Buddhahood and are entities of the Mystic Law.

¹¹ This expresses the oneness or nonduality of the saha world and the Land of Tranquil Light, the assertion that the saha world of suffering and desire where ordinary people dwell is not separate from the Land of Tranquil Light where the Buddha constantly abides from the remote past.

¹² The Lotus Sutra states: “In order to save living beings, / as an expedient means I appear to enter nirvana / but in truth I do not pass into extinction. / I am always here, preaching the Law” (LSOC16, 270–71). The Buddha enters nirvana as an expedient means to arouse the longing and desire of living beings to see him.

¹³ Eagle Peak is the place where Shakyamuni preached the Lotus Sutra. It is also called the pure land of Eagle Peak, symbolizing the Buddha land or the eternal state of Buddhahood.

¹⁴ The Buddha sees the threefold world in which living beings dwell—the world of desire, the world of form, and the world of formlessness—as it really is and apprehends the Ten Worlds of all phenomena as they truly are. Based on this insight, the Buddha imparts the wisdom of his enlightenment to relieve the sufferings of all living beings.

The Buddha is not some special kind of being. The Buddha as taught in the “Life Span” chapter is one who manifests great compassion and, over repeated phases of life and death, leads living beings to enlightenment in this saha world. In the same way, we Soka Gakkai members, while grappling with our own problems here in the reality of the threefold world, go out among those racked by the sufferings of birth, aging, sickness, and death. With prayers of compassion and empathy, we act for our own and others’ happiness and for peace and harmony in society. (...)

Next, *The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings* indicates that, when we see the true aspect of reality through the eyes of the “Life Span” chapter, all people—though themselves impermanent and unable to escape the sufferings of birth, aging, sickness, and death—are infinitely noble individuals, eternally undergoing birth and death as phases originally inherent in life. (...)

The Daishonin says: “The aspect or characteristics of the threefold world are birth, aging, sickness, and death. But if we look at birth and death in terms of their true nature, then there is no birth or death” (OTT, 127). “True nature” here is the original nature inherent in these two phenomena. (...) The profound insight of the Buddha is that both birth and death are phases and functions of life’s eternal nature.

The Universal Rhythm of Birth and Death

Mr. Toda always said that after death, our lives merge with the universe: “It is not a rebirth—marking a fresh start with a clean slate—but a continuation. Our lives continue on from this existence into the next. . . . The universe has no beginning and no end. Our lives have no beginning or end, either. They go on forever.”¹⁵

The Daishonin identified this eternal nature of life as the “two phases of life and death,” and the “two functions of Myoho-renge-kyo.” (...)

The Mystic Law is the fundamental principle extending through both life and death. It underlies not only to human life but all phenomena of the universe. All the living beings of the Ten Worlds and their environments are entities of the Mystic Law.

The wisdom of Buddhism recognizes that the entire universe eternally undergoes the rhythm of birth and death. (...)

“Seeing and understanding the originally inherent nature of birth and death is termed awakening, or original enlightenment” (OTT, 127). By chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we come to perceive the originally inherent nature of birth and death. That is, we gain deep conviction in the eternity of our lives throughout past, present, and future and bring forth the power to live this life in the most meaningful and fulfilling way. And, in accord with the strict Buddhist principle of cause and effect, our victory in this life determines our good fortune in the next.

That is why the Daishonin underscores the importance of “[summoning] up one’s faith . . . with the profound insight that now is the last moment of one’s life” (WND-1, 216). We must make each moment of our lives shine its brightest with the awareness that “now is the last moment.” We achieve this, the Daishonin says, when we “chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo” (OTT, 127). (...)

Because life and death are originally inherent, we have no reason to fear death and can savor joy in both life and death, and be equally happy and at ease with both.

¹⁵ Translated from Japanese. Josei Toda, *Toda Josei zenshu* (Collected Writings of Josei Toda), vol. 5 (Tokyo: Seikyo Shimbunsha, 1985), p. 411.

Of course, as mortal human beings, the idea of death can make us feel sad and forlorn. When a loved one dies, waves of grief assail us. But if we steadily continue chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we can transcend the bounds of life and death and converse with our loved ones. Fellow members will also chant for us and support us in our loss. In time, we will come to find the profound meaning of our loved one's death and feel a sense of hope for renewal. (...)

In the light of the Daishonin's writings, our journey of kosen-rufu is not at all limited to this lifetime. From the perspective of the Buddha—from a life state awakened to the inherent eternal nature of existence—death is just a short rest that is over "in no time" (WND-2, 860). A new lifetime of mission and good fortune will soon begin, and with refreshed vigor we will freely enact a new drama based on our vow as a Bodhisattva of the Earth. (...)

We can all sense that humanity is at a major crossroads. In this perilous age, people are looking forward with ever-growing interest and hope to our actions and initiatives based on the life-affirming principles of Nichiren Buddhism.

In high spirits, with enthusiasm and vigor, let's continue together on our journey of kosen-rufu, in which joy pervades both life and death.

Confidently illuminating the world with the Buddhism of the Sun, let us keep forging ahead together on the great path of the oneness of mentor and disciple toward the sure realization of happiness for ourselves and others and lasting peace!