

What does it mean to be a Buddhist: A Conversation with a Buddha.
By Kysten A. Palmore

One sleepless night as I lay awake in bed contemplating this Buddhist practice that my dear friends introduced me to, I found myself in conflict. The conflict was over giving up on a religion that I was born into but not really apart of, and accepting a way of life that I knew little about except from the few articles I received over the past few months. I thought being born black, female, and gay was enough of a fringe I hit the trifecta but, to add Buddhist to that list was too many minority categories for one person to bear alone. If my life was a poker game I would be a full house.

As I tossed and turned a thousand and one questions came to mind. As I battle for some sense of clarity and answers to the never-ending questions, I heard a voice, a voice that sounded familiar but one I couldn't identify. Like an old song from days gone by playing on the radio, you know the song but, you're unable to identify the artist. The voice I heard was neither loud, nor imposing or threatening, in fact, it was calm, purposeful and soothing. The voice said "I have the answers to conquer your doubts". "Who are you" I asked? To which the voice replied "you already know who I am". "I do," I said. To which the voice replied "Yes, you do."

Unwilling to entertain my curiosity about the identity of the voice any further, the voice continued. "The literal meaning of Buddha is 'enlightened one.' In Buddhism we strive to find happiness, peace, and enlightenment. These concepts are often misunderstood to mean the absence of something. However, Buddhism teaches us that happiness is the refusal to be defeated by our troubles and an unknown author once wrote that 'peace does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble, or hard work. It means to be in the midst of those things and still be calm in your heart.' Enlightenment is a fully awakened state of vast wisdom through which reality in all its complexity can be fully understood and enjoyed."

“Any human being who is awakened to the fundamental truth about life can be called a Buddha. This is the beauty of this practice, that all people are capable of attaining Buddhahood, all humans possess the Buddha nature within themselves they just have to be awoken to this knowledge. This is the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. The Lotus Sutra is known as the last and the highest teachings of the Four Noble Truths it explains that Buddhahood is already present in all life. It teaches absolute equality and emphasizes that even within the life of a person apparently dominated by evil there exists the rough and unpolished jewel of the Buddha nature. No one else gives it to us or judges whether we ‘deserve’ it.”

“You can achieve happiness, peace, and enlightenment by simply chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with sincerity. It sounds too simplistic to be true but it is the truth, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is your path to true happiness, enlightenment and peace.” The voice continued, “the fact is, please excuse me from borrowing a phrase from the great philosopher Dr. Seuss, you can chant it in your house with your mouse, you can chant it in your car on your way to a bar, you can chant it here or there you can chant it anywhere. You can chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo everywhere.” “As a matter of fact, to coin a popular phrase, you can chant till you pant.” But, “A h ha,” I jumped in eagerly, “see I knew there was a but, there is always a but or a catch.” “Will you pipe down” the voice said “you didn’t let me finish my thought. But, first you must believe you are a Buddha and deserve to be happy, you deserve to find peace and enlightenment then and only then will the path to true happiness, enlightenment and peace, be open to you.”

“I must warn you,” “what” I interrupted again, “whoever heard of a philosophy with a warning label, see I knew this Buddhists thing was too good to be true.” The voice said “will you stop already with the interruptions I need to inform you, is that better, that Buddhahood is not a static condition or a state

in which you can rest complacently. Rather, it is a dynamic experience and a journey of continual development and discovery.” “You mean I have to work at it,” I said. Slightly annoyed, the voice said “I thought we agreed that you would stop interrupting me.” “Oh, you weren’t finished?” “Well, yes but, not really, it doesn’t matter you still interrupted me” the voice said trying to contain exasperation. “Well, excuse me but, I didn’t recall saying that I wanted to work for a philosophy”, I said emphatically.

The voice ignored the attitude and continued before I could say another word, “to live means to suffer, because the human nature is not perfect and neither is the world we live in. During our lifetime, we inevitably have to endure physical suffering such as pain, sickness, injury, tiredness, old age, and eventually death; and we have to endure psychological suffering like sadness, fear, frustration, disappointment, and depression. Although there are different degrees of suffering and there are also positive experiences in life that we perceive as the opposite of suffering, such as ease, comfort and happiness, life in its totality is imperfect and incomplete, because our world is subject to impermanence. With that said do you think that happiness, peace and enlightenment will come into your life without working for it?” “Since you explained that way, you make a pretty good point”, I said.

The voice continued on, “when we continually reinforce the Buddhahood in our lives, we come to be ruled less and less by selfishness (or greed), anger and foolishness--what Buddhism terms the three poisons. As we fuse our lives with the enlightened life of the Buddha, we can tap the potential within us and change ourselves in a fundamental way.”

“President Ikeda has often talked about changing ourselves by setting forth a determination to lift our hearts in faith each day, so that our Buddhahood may shine forth in our lives. He also says when you change your determinations

all around you will begin to move in the direction you desire. The moment you resolve to be victorious, every nerve and fiber of your being will immediately orient itself toward your success. If however, you think your determinations are not worthy or are impossible to achieve, at that instant every cell in your being will be deflected and your determinations will be defeated by giving up the fight to be victorious. As a result, all around you will move in the direction of failure.”

“WOW”, I said. “I wonder how many great opportunities I missed out on in my lifetime just because I set forth a defeatist attitude. I wonder how much of my own growth I stifled because of negativity and doubt. I wonder what would have happened if I had been optimistic about my life and earlier opportunities that came my way but due to negative forces within me I lost out because I did not believe I was worthy, because I did not believe in the inherent Buddha nature within in me to do what I truly desired to do.” To which the voice replied Nichiren said “when deluded one is called an ordinary being, but when enlightened one is called a Buddha”. What immediately came to mind is that I have been an ordinary person for far too long it’s time to become a Buddha. At that moment, the alarm clock rang and I opened my eyes and realized that I am a Buddha, and the answers I was seeking the night before I knew all along. And the voice I heard was not a voice belonging to another but my own voice of reason and enlightenment.