

“Becoming a buddha in this world” preached by 道元(Dogen) and 日蓮(Nichiren)

The Kamakura period(1185–1333) saw the idea of “becoming a buddha in this world” in addition to the Pure Land idea “becoming a buddha in the next world.” Here, we’re going to take Dogen and Nichiren as examples of the former.

Dogen(1200–1253) was the founder of the 曹洞宗(Soto school) of Zen Buddhism. He was born into a family of the nobility, but when he was still a child he lost both of his parents. At the age of 13, he went to Mt.Hiei determined to become a priest. At that time, however, Mt Hiei was a place where warrior-monks sought influence and where Buddhism had lost its original purity. Unable to endure the situation, Dogen left the temple within 2 years. He went to 建仁寺(Kenninji), visited 荣西(Eisai) and learned about Zen. After Eisai’s death, Dogen crossed over to China.

心身脱落(shinjin-datsuraku)=cast off body and mind

One day when earnestly and devotedly practicing Zen, he had an amazing experience. He felt as if his “self” had disappeared from within his own mind. This was Dogen’s experience of spiritual awakening, and he named that 心身脱落 (shinjin-datsuraku): cast off body and mind. This phrase would continue to have great importance to Dogen throughout his life, and can be found scattered throughout his writings, as—for example—in a famous section of his “Genjokoan” (現成公案): To study the Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things of the universe.

To be enlightened by all things of the universe is to cast off the body and mind of the self as well as those of others. Even the traces of enlightenment are wiped out, and life with traceless enlightenment goes on forever and ever.

His idea is, thus, a kind of cosmology: practicing zazen leads to becoming one with nature, and becoming a buddha along with nature.

It holds that the purpose of seated meditation is not to achieve enlightenment, but rather to discard all thoughts and completely become a buddha. He promoted a seated meditation in which one simply sits and holds in mind the belief that one’s own self is a buddha.

So, different from Honen and Shinran, Dogen alleged that one could become a buddha in this world, not in the next world.

As mentioned above, people found salvation in this world by practicing Zen. It’s, however, difficult to get enlightenment only by practicing zazen. People’s wish to become buddhas more easily led to the birth of Nichiren(1222–1282).

Nichiren was born into the family of a fisherman in Chiba. While still a boy he was determined to become a priest, and later went to Kyoto and studied on Mt.Hiei. Having become convinced from all his experiences to that point that he believed that the Lotus Sutra(法華經) was the only true teaching. Determined to expound the Lotus Sutra, he declared his intention of establishing the Nichiren sect.

南無妙法蓮華經(Namu Myoho Renge-kyo)

He asserted that if anyone only devoted himself to this sutra chanting “南無妙法蓮華經(Namu Myoho Renge-kyo),” he could become a buddha. So that means “adoring the Lotus Sutra”, which is equal to getting merit of reading through all the Lotus Sutra. Therefore people entered the situation that they didn’t have to read the difficult book “the Lotus Sutra.”

This was similar to Honen’s view that whoever intoned “南無阿弥陀仏(Namu Amida Butsu)” would be saved. Perhaps there was some influence. However, Honen’s idea is “to become a buddha in the next world,” while Nichiren’s idea is “to become a buddha in this world.” Compare the looks of the founders preaching “become a buddha in this world” and “in the next world.” Nichiren and Kukai seem to have been full of energy, while Saicho, Honen and Shinran had a rueful expression.



Kukai



Saicho

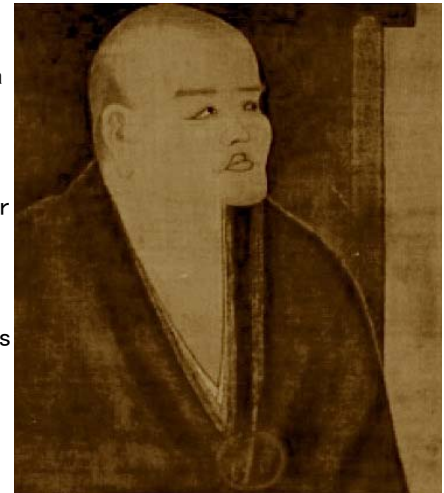


Honen



Shinran

Well, going back to Nichiren. In the 13th century, a series of natural disasters, famine and epidemics plagued the populace. He claimed that the only way to resolve affairs was for the nation as a whole to pay homage to the Lotus Sutra. In sum, it can be said that while the teaching of the Nichiren sect are for the salvation of the individual, they also place weight on the salvation of society.



Dogen



Nichiren