

The ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’: From Without to Within

*Midway in the journey of our life I found myself
in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost.*

— Dante

Most of us would love to visit an exotic place. Despite long lines at airports and travel warnings issued by the State Department, we still yearn to stand on the Incan ruins at Machu Picchu or daydream of lounging on a Tahitian beach. Of course, when we leave town, we want to relax and have fun. Leisure, however, does not seem to be the only element behind our passion for travel.

When we leave behind our mundane responsibilities and wake up one morning thousands of miles away from home, we sometimes get in touch with a part of us that has been long forgotten through many years of daily routine. So when we come home, we somehow feel refreshed and more wholesome, despite jet lag and swollen feet.

A good trip, in this way, works like a good work of art. Like reading *Don Quixote* or listening to “Ode to Joy,” a truly rewarding trip is one that helps us discover more of ourselves. On the contrary, a mediocre trip, although it may be full of frivolous fun, is devoid of such joy of self-

● KEY POINTS:

(1) **Lost proximity, gained perspective:**

Seeking salvation outside has no place in Nichiren Buddhism. What is most important is faith in our inherent Buddhahood. Much more than what we lost in proximity to the Dai-Gohonzon we have gained in perspective on faith. Proximity to the Dai-Gohonzon, or even its possession, is, after all, meaningless without the correct perspective on faith. As Nichiren Daishonin says, “Even embracing the Lotus Sutra would be useless without the heritage of faith.”

(2) **Overcoming our doubt and fear of**

Buddhahood: We doubt our inherent Buddha nature because of our ignorance and habitual self-disparagement. We fear the Buddha within and seek the imaginary Buddha outside so that we may remain as a victim of circumstances and avoid the responsibility of realizing our full potential. Our honest self-reflection and persistent faith will help us break through such doubt and fear and discover the gem of Buddhahood within.



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discovery and self-renewal. This may be due more to the difference in attitude between a traveler seeking new knowledge and a tourist waiting to be entertained, rather than to the difference in distance or destination.

We are strangers to ourselves

Our desire to travel to a far-off land, as we may tell from our experiences, is deeply related to our yearning to reunite with something important or even sacred from which we feel alienated. Our passion for travel, in this sense, is something almost religious. This may be one of the chief reasons for the popular union of travel and faith, that is, pilgrimage.

In most major religions of the world, believers throughout the centuries have made a journey to their sacred places as an act of religious devotion: for example, Christians and Jews to Jerusalem; Muslims to Mecca; Hindus to Benares; Buddhists to Bodh Gaya and so forth. Furthermore, countless local shrines and temples the world over are visited by their devotees every year. People's attachment to these holy sites is so strong, and at times misguided, that too much blood has been spilt in drawing and redrawing their boundaries.

The etymologies of the words *religion* and *pilgrimage* are suggestive of our essential motive for undertaking a journey of faith, as language often shapes and is shaped by the lives of people who use it. The word *religion* is related to the Latin verb *religare*, that is, "to tie back" or "to unite," and the word *pilgrimage* to the Latin verb *peregrinari*, that is, "to travel abroad" or "to be a stranger." The linguistic origins of those words indicate that we somehow feel like a stranger in the world we live in. So we leave our homes and travel abroad in search of something from which we have been estranged.

Our fundamental religious impulse, in other words, derives from our sense of aloneness and alienation. As one historian writes, "The desire to be a pilgrim is deeply rooted in human nature;"¹

we see ourselves as strangers who wander through foreign lands, seeking to unite with something precious we have lost.

In many ways, people try hard to overcome this sense of separation — the cause of which, however, they are unable to pinpoint. Some seek solace in their supposed saviors in heaven while others in love on earth. The Lotus Sutra, however, identifies that from which we are alienated as our innate Buddhahood. It teaches that our true longing is neither for a god living above us nor for a perfect lover ever eluding our grasp.

After many years (or even lifetimes) of deluded self-disparagement (in other words, “the slander of the Law”), we have become strangers to ourselves, to our true self, that is, the universal Buddha nature within us. A fundamental way to overcome our sense of separation, therefore, is to see ourselves for what we truly are and tap into the most essential part of our lives. The Lotus Sutra metaphorically illustrates this point through the parable of “the gem in the robe.”

The Lotus Sutra transforms the ideas of pilgrimage and worship

In the “Prophecy of Enlightenment for Five Hundred Disciples” chapter of the sutra, the Buddha’s disciples — reflecting upon their previous ignorance of “comprehensive wisdom” — tell the following parable: “World-Honored One, it was like the case of a man who went to the house of a close friend and, having become drunk on wine, lay down to sleep. At that time the friend had to go out on official business. He took a priceless jewel, sewed it in the lining of the man’s robe, and left it with him when he went out. The man was asleep drunk and knew nothing about it. When he got up, he set out on a journey to other countries. In order to provide himself with food and clothing he had to search with all his energy and diligence, encountering very great hardship and making do with what little

To stay on the straight path to happiness, we must clearly perceive and guard against whatever distracts us from our inward journey to find the precious gem of Buddhahood.



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Nichiren Daishonin teaches that we can discover the priceless jewel of Buddhahood inside all of us through chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with faith in this great potential.

he could come by. Later, the close friend happened to meet him by chance. The friend said, ‘How absurd, old fellow! Why should you have to do all this for the sake of food and clothing? In the past I wanted to make certain you would be able to live in ease and satisfy the five desires, and so on such-and-such a day and month and year I took a priceless jewel and sewed it in the lining of your robe. It must still be there now. But you did not know about it, and fretted and wore yourself out trying to provide a living for yourself. What nonsense! Now you must take the jewel and exchange it for goods. Then you can have whatever you wish at all times and never experience poverty or want’ (*The Lotus Sutra*, trans. Burton Watson, pp. 150–51).

In this parable, the good friend represents the Buddha, and the priceless jewel sewn in the lining of the poor man’s robe our innate Buddha nature hidden in the depths of our lives. The poor man is symbolic of the “pilgrim” in all of us, who wanders through life in search of true happiness. His tragedy is that despite all the “energy and diligence” he exerts

himself with, he meets nothing but “very great hardship” without ever feeling truly satisfied. His problem is his ignorance; he is looking for the source of happiness in the wrong place — outside himself.

Just like this poor man, we often seek in vain our self-worth in status, material possessions or the approval of others — whether they are parents or partners, or supposed saviors or saints. The last place we look is our own lives, for we judge ourselves by the tattered clothes of temporary setbacks in life and delude ourselves into believing that there is nothing valuable intrinsic to our lives.

Regarding this parable, Nichiren Daishonin explains that the wine that the poor man drinks is his “fundamental darkness” and his drunken state his “disbelief” of his own Buddhahood (“Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings,” *Gosho Zenshu*, p. 735). He also comments, “As Nichiren and his followers now chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, they awaken from the wine of the fundamental darkness” (GZ, p. 735).

Here the Daishonin declares that through devoting ourselves to the chanting of Nam-

myoho-rence-kyo with faith in our innate Buddhahood, we begin to experience the power of the priceless jewel inside us and live our lives as Buddhas — as persons of genuine strength and courage who are capable of building their own happiness while encouraging others to do the same. As the Daishonin suggests, the Lotus Sutra’s “comprehensive wisdom” that enables us to see the priceless jewel of Buddhahood inside can be found in and cultivated through faith in our Buddha nature and the practice of chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo.

Through the parable of the gem in the robe, the Lotus Sutra underscores the futility of searching for the source of happiness outside ourselves. It may be significant to note that the compilation of the Lotus Sutra is an outgrowth of the Mahayana Buddhist movement, which evolved from the popular practice of visiting a Buddhist memorial tower called “stupa” and worshipping the Buddha’s relics supposedly enshrined inside. The sutra, however, transcends the limitations of its historical origin.

Through describing the appearance of the magnificent treasure tower beyond any earthly measure as a metaphor of our innate Buddha nature, the Lotus Sutra directs our gaze from a stupa outside to the treasure tower inside. Also through stories such as the gem in the robe, the sutra stresses the importance of self-awakening instead of salvation from outside. The Lotus Sutra, therefore, marks a Copernican transformation of the idea of pilgrimage and worship from one that is directed toward *without* into one that is directed toward *within*.

In fact, the Lotus Sutra refutes people’s attachment to sacred sites and particular places of worship. As the sutra has its true practitioners foretell their future: “Again and again we will be banished / to a place far removed from towers and temples” (LS, p. 195). Despite exile and persecution, those votaries of the sutra pledge to spread its teaching far and wide. Their connection with Buddhism is not tied to any particular place, nor does their relationship with the



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To seek the priceless jewel of Buddhahood outside is to be drunk on “the wine of the fundamental darkness,” says Nichiren Daishonin.

Buddha depend upon any sentimentality attached to his physical presence or his relics.

Instead, what links those votaries with their teacher and his teaching is their resolve to practice and spread Buddhism with the same spirit. As they proclaim: “If in the settlements and towns / there are those who seek the Law, / we will go to wherever they are / and preach the Law entrusted to us by the Buddha. / We will be envoys of the World-Honored One, / facing the assembly without fear...we proclaim this vow. / The Buddha must know what is in our hearts” (LS, p. 195). The Lotus Sutra makes it clear that Buddhism lives on not in “towers and temples,” but in its practitioners’ “vow” to spread the Buddhist wisdom of self-discovery and self-renewal for the ordinary people living in “settlements and towns.”

During the first century of the Common Era, in which the Lotus Sutra is said to have been compiled, those “towers and temples” in India generally indicated stupas and structures surrounding them. As people revered and worshiped the Buddha’s relics supposedly enshrined inside, those Buddhist memorials



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Stupa or Buddhist memorial in Sanchi, India, built around the 1st century C.E. during which the Lotus Sutra is said to have been compiled. Stupas, with the Buddha's relics supposedly enshrined inside, became a sacred destination of popular pilgrimage and an important source of income for clergy. The Lotus Sutra predicts that its practitioners will be banished repeatedly from such stupas by corrupt religious authority.

came to be regarded as sacred sites and attracted many pilgrims, thus becoming an important source of income for clergy. The sutra predicts that its practitioners will be banished repeatedly from those supposedly “sacred” sites.

Through this episode of banishment, the compilers of the Lotus Sutra, as the reformers of Buddhism, probably wished to leave behind their own experiences in promoting the revival of the Buddha's true teaching while facing the opposition of clergy. The sutra, in this sense, seems to be asking us: Does Buddhism exist in some sacred sites or in some physical objects such as the Buddha's relics? Or does it come alive in the hearts and actions of practitioners dedicated to the happiness of people? The sutra's message, after two millennia, still rings with truth and urgency today.

Our 'pilgrimage' is an inward search of Buddhahood

What stands in our way as we search for the priceless gem of Buddhahood within is our doubt and fear. We doubt our Buddhahood because we are accustomed to disparaging ourselves. By the culture of competition and consumption, we are trained to think less of

ourselves if we do not possess more than others whatever we are told to possess — usually money, status and appearance. We fear and flee from our Buddhahood because it is easier to remain victims of fate who can always blame everything but ourselves than to become makers of fate who must self-reflect and bear the challenge of revealing our utmost potential.

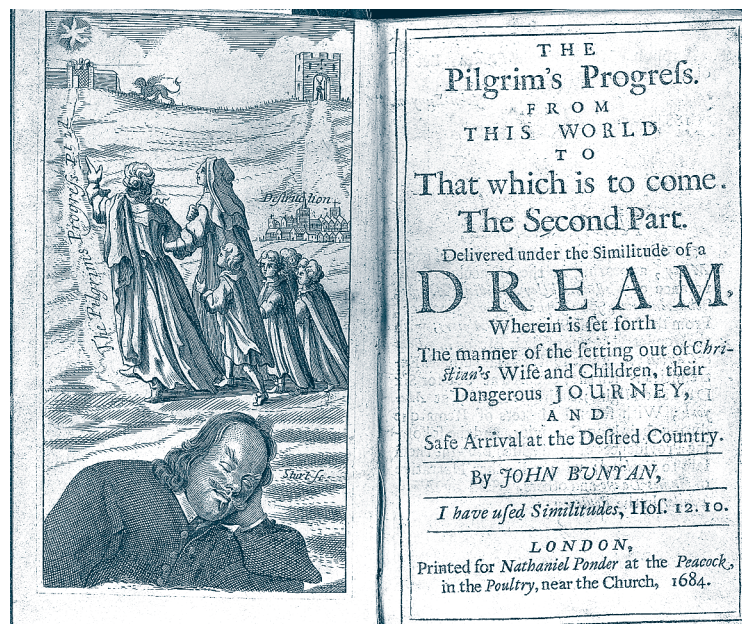
Buddhas, nevertheless, do not live *beyond* such delusions. Rather, Buddhas rise *above* their deep-seated doubt and fear of Buddhahood through courageous self-reflection and persistent faith in the essential self. Attaining Buddhahood, in this sense, is the process of overcoming our own doubt and fear through seeking true self-knowledge. In the course of our Buddhist practice, therefore, we must clearly perceive and guard against whatever distracts us from this inward journey to find the priceless gem of Buddhahood.

In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which remains one of the most influential Christian writings, John Bunyan (1628–88) describes in the style of dream allegory the pilgrimage of an ordinary

man called “Christian” from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. Christian’s spiritual pilgrimage “from this world to that which is to come”—as the book’s subtitle reads—may be understood as a Protestant response to the medieval institution of pilgrimage, which was promoted by the Church and eventually degenerated through the abuse of relics and indulgences. In fact, pilgrimages were imposed by the Inquisition as penances for both religious and secular crimes and became part of civil and criminal law penalties.² Bunyan probably wished to correct such coercion and corruption of pilgrimage by stressing pilgrimage as the spiritual progress of a believer, not as earthly travel to receive remissions for sins or to worship relics. As an eighth-century Irish poem reads: “To go [to] Rome means great labour and little profit; the king you seek can only be found there if you bring him within yourself.”³

With a sense of endearment and nostalgia, we sometimes call those English families who founded the colony of Plymouth in 1620 “Pilgrim Fathers.” As the original settlers felt like pilgrims and strangers in the New World, many Americans still feel the same way—perhaps not in the external environment, but in their inner landscape of aloneness and alienation. The Lotus Sutra and Nichiren Buddhism, in this regard, may act as a guide to bring a sense of direction to America’s spiritual wandering.

A genuine Buddhist “pilgrimage”—if such a word should exist in our vocabulary—is neither from our homes to a distant sacred place nor “from this world to that which is to come.” With our consistent Buddhist faith and practice, we progress through doubt and fear toward the inner source of true happiness in the here and now and daily reach our destination of self-realization. So ours is a new kind of pilgrimage, one that reorients life’s wandering without into life’s discovery within. ■



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In The Pilgrim's Progress, John Bunyan stresses pilgrimage as the spiritual progress of a believer, not as earthly travel to receive remissions for sins or to worship relics.

● Food for Thought:

■ If attaining enlightenment is the ongoing process of overcoming our doubt and fear of Buddhahood, then recognizing these obstacles for what they are is to go more than halfway toward our mastery. In what way do you experience doubt and fear of Buddhahood? And how do you challenge them?

■ In the parable of the gem in the robe, the poor man fortunately reunites with his good friend after many years of wandering. But what if he happens on someone who poses as his good friend yet further misguides his search of happiness away from his own Buddhahood? How can we tell an impostor from a genuine good friend in faith?