



The Karma of Slavery: A Ruminaton

TRACY WATSON

In Nichiren Buddhism, attaining enlightenment is not about embarking on some inconceivably long journey to become a resplendent, godlike Buddha, it is about accomplishing a transformation in the depths of one's being. In other words, it is not a matter of practicing in order to scale the highest summit of enlightenment at some point in the distant future. Rather, it is a constant, moment-to-moment, inner struggle between revealing our innate Dharma nature or allowing ourselves to be ruled by our fundamental darkness and delusion.

—Daisaku Ikeda¹

THE YEAR I TURNED 21, I found myself randomly crying for no reason, and I began seeing a therapist. Four months into therapy, I was introduced to Nichiren Buddhism through a colleague of my mother's, who had invited her to attend a Buddhist discussion meeting. When they faced their object of devotion (a mandala called the *gohonzon*²), I had a flashback: I was three or four, and I was in a room with dozens of people facing a box. Inside the box was the sun, shooting warm and soothing rays out towards us. I felt an indescribable peace. That box, I now realized, was the *butsudan* (altar) in which a *gohonzon* is enshrined. That sun *was* the *gohonzon*, which is a copy of the mandala inscribed by Nichiren Daishonin roughly 700 years prior. My mother confirmed that we had indeed been to a similar Buddhist meeting around the time I was three.

After the meeting, I remember asking several questions about the nature of life and death. The questions were well received and roundly answered. Without asking, I was told that by practicing Buddhism I could become absolutely

happy. I wanted that more than anything in the world. So it was that, 32 years ago, my journey to study and practice this philosophy began.

The Clear Mirror of Buddhism and My Fundamental Darkness

As I strove to practice Buddhism, to understand the true nature of my life and the ultimate reality, I began to uncover a deep-seated self-hatred. For what seemed like a hundred lifetimes, I'd lived in fear of life. At the center of this fear was my fundamental darkness. It whispered to me, constantly, "You are insignificant. Worthless. You will never matter." Because of this, in the beginning, my daily prayer was to become absolutely happy.

As I chanted Daimoku,³ my fundamental darkness assailed me. But as I persevered in deepening my faith in the Lotus Sūtra (the basis of Nichiren Buddhism),⁴ a fledgling consciousness (my fundamental enlightenment) began to challenge the dominance of my fundamental darkness. "A mind now clouded by the illusions of the innate darkness of life is like a tarnished mirror, but when polished, it is sure to become like a clear mirror, reflecting the essential nature of phenomena and the true aspect of reality... How should you polish it? Only by chanting Nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō."⁵ With Buddhist study as my GPS, I polished my life daily. As my perception of the purpose of my life shifted and opened up, my prayer expanded to include the suffering of other people. I began to strive to live based on the bodhisattva's vow, which stems from the Buddha's vow.

The Buddha and the Mystic Law

A Buddha is "a person awakened to the truth that all people are equally endowed with the Buddha nature or enlightened nature. Awakened to this truth, to the Mystic Law, the Buddha then strives to make all people aware of it."⁶ This is the Buddha's vow. A Buddha is humanistic praxis personified: someone who continuously takes action to validate the theory of universal enlightenment through an indefatigable vow to bring that awareness to all. We can manifest the state of Buddhahood through doing the same. In Nichiren Buddhism, this is called practice for oneself and others (Japanese: *jigyo keta*). Striving to believe in my intrinsic enlightenment and that of those around me has been the key to ending my own suffering—and the key to my emancipation.

The Fundamental Cause of All Suffering and the Karma of Slavery

Striving to practice *jigyo keta*, it was only natural that I began to apply these concepts to the suffering of my people and to confront the most painful aspects of our individual and collective experience. At some point, a question began to surface when I chanted: *What had our ancestors done to experience American slavery, the quintessence of human suffering? What was the original cause?* To answer that, I began to delve deeper into the concept of “suffering” and its causes as understood in Nichiren Buddhism.

In his exposition on the nature of suffering, Daisaku Ikeda elucidates the essential point of the twelve-linked chain of causation⁷ thusly: “the ignorance, illusion and darkness that is the cause of all suffering and delusion derives from ignorance about the true nature of existence. Ignorance is the first of the twelve-linked chain of causation, the sequence of causal relationships connecting ignorance with suffering.” In that framework, “ignorance is the fundamental cause of delusion, suffering and transmigration...”⁸

Nichiren Buddhism posits that all suffering can be seen as “voluntarily assumed” in order to lead others to enlightenment, if we vow to use them for this purpose. This is called “voluntarily assuming the correct karma.” To illustrate, the Buddha prophesied that in a latter-day existence, good men and good women would freely choose to be born in the evil world and expound the unsurpassed Law,⁹ “voluntarily relinquishing the reward due them for their pure deeds,” out of pity for living beings.¹⁰ How might this apply to the karma of slavery? Was it conceivable that I—that we—*chose* to suffer the effects of structural racism in all its permutations in order to save living beings? In attempting to grapple with this, I began an interrogation of my understanding of karma.

Which Karma is *Which*? General Causality versus the Causality of the Mystic Law

There are two views of karma: general causality—the sequential law of cause and effect, articulated in the Contemplation on the Mind-Ground Sūtra,¹¹ and the causality of the Mystic Law. The former posits that our present experiences are caused by choices we made in past lives. Similarly, the seeds of all future effects are present in the causes we are making in the present moment. This is both unsettling and provocative in its austere logic and unequivocal determinism. The causality of the Mystic Law is grounded in the simultaneity of cause *and* effect, meaning one need not undergo Buddhist practice for countless life-

times to change one's karma accumulated over countless lifetimes. Moreover, this conceptualization of karma is transcendent, in that it reveals our ability to transform the karma we created in previous lifetimes in our present existence.¹² This is based on the concept of the coexistence and interdependence of the past, present and the future in the present moment.¹³ It is worth mentioning that “karma” is not intrinsically negative or positive—it is simply the manifest effects of previous actions—and can be anything from extraordinarily positive to abjectly wretched, and everything in between. It is also worth mentioning that karma is dynamic, not static, and we are continuously interacting with our particular karma.

Nevertheless, I struggled with how this could possibly be applied to the karma of slavery and its legacy, to accept that there was a greater purpose to the generations of racialized violence we have lived through. As with all my struggles, I chanted for the absolute happiness of those I considered to be “the problem.” This has always been the surest path to transforming painful karma into mission and that mission into the joy of the Law.

Between the murder of Freddie Gray (2015) and the murder of George Floyd (2020), I began to challenge myself to pray for white supremacists. This shift was greatly animated by my graduate research of rural racial solidarity movements in Iowa and in North Carolina. It was during this transformative time in my practice, that, for the first time, I was able to subdue my revulsion and sit in meditation, praying for the enlightenment of the men and women who killed and continue to kill my people because of their hatred and fear of us. I prayed for the enlightenment of people who seek to rob my people of the right to live with dignity, to walk this land freely, to be respected as full-fledged human beings.

Along the way, I lapsed into periods of rage, grief, disaffection, and hopelessness. My rage was, and is, justified, but in its raw form it will not transform my life, nor will it transform society. The feelings that arose had to be transmuted into something more. As I continued my meditation, a new array of unsettling thoughts surfaced: *I used to be a white plantation owner and I've been reborn as a Black person in America. I belonged to an African tribe that sold African prisoners or slaves to the Portuguese.* And so on. I can see clearly now that my perception at the outset of this rumination was firmly entrenched in the general causal view of karma. Every time someone—or I—said, “What goes around, comes around,” my gut lurched, and my mind recoiled. If this was so, the original cause of slavery must be akin to our “original sin.”

Every day, either directly or indirectly, I saw the karma of slavery: the legacy of the oppressor and the oppressed. I saw it in the persistent violation of indigenous sovereignty in my homeland, America, and in my spiritual home-

land—everywhere there are people being oppressed. My *Blackness* was created as a shorthand to bequeath to me a world order and a lived experience of sub-humanity. Bombarded with daily psychic assaults, I struggled to continue chanting for those who profit from, and perpetuate, racialized violence. On both sides of my family, I know that we came here in bondage. I know that I am part of a psychic collective that experienced an assault so horrific, so bestial, so barbaric, that even now its residue lives on.

How do I know? Because I felt it.

In 2004, I went to spend Diwali with a friend living in Charlotte, NC. I had never been to the South. My second day there, we drove to the historic district. On our way to the battlements and the old plantation district, a friend of my friend's said in passing, "There is the old slave block." I glanced at it on my left, slightly uneasy at the thought. Moments later, I had the sensation of being drenched in blood, literally. I tried blinking, wiping my face, but for more than five minutes, as my friend and her friends continued their small talk, the deluge persisted. I felt as if gallons of blood were running down my forehead, into my eyes, over my ears, into my nostrils and down my shirt. And I knew that this was the blood of my ancestors—of all of our ancestors—that had been spilled in this place.

Changing "Poison into Medicine": The Lesson of Devadatta and Bodhisattva Never Disparaging

At some point, my original question began to change, morphing from, *What was the cause that led us to have the experience of slavery and of being Black, Latinx, Indigenous—in the colonial-settler world system?* to *How can we, the descendants of African slaves and displaced and dispossessed Native Americans, alter the trajectory of humanity?* This led me to reflect on the concept of *esho-funi*—the oneness of self and environment. To illustrate, the Daishonin quotes the Vimalakīrti Sūtra: "If the minds of living beings are impure, their land is also impure, but if their minds are pure, so is their land. There are not two lands, pure or impure in themselves. The difference lies solely in the good or evil of our minds." He adds, "It is the same with a Buddha and an ordinary being. When deluded, one is called an ordinary being, but when enlightened, one is called a Buddha."¹⁴

I began to reflect on the counterfactual of my experience—namely, what would I be doing if I were not born with this karma? Would I have the unyielding drive to fight for justice? Would I be vigilant in speaking out against injustice? Would I see myself in the joys and suffering of indigenous people the

world over? Would I celebrate in the triumph of our persistence and our excellence? From the perspective of Buddhism, I *chose* to be born with my particular negative karma as an expedient means to save living beings—all living beings. I recalled the example of Devadatta in the Lotus Sūtra.

Devadatta, once one of the Buddha's foremost disciples, became so consumed with jealousy and hatred that he attempted on several occasions to kill the Buddha. He succeeded in wounding him and in killing several of his disciples, including one of the Buddha's aunts. But in the "Devadatta" chapter of the Lotus Sūtra, the Buddha says: "The fact that I have attained impartial and correct enlightenment and can save living beings on a broad scale is all due to Devadatta, who was a good friend."¹⁵ Even more incredibly, he predicts that Devadatta will eventually attain enlightenment.

In predicting Devadatta's future enlightenment, the Buddha uses this example to demonstrate the power of the Mystic Law to "change poison into medicine" and gives credence to its assertion that it can save all living beings, no matter their karmic impediments. Further, the Buddha declares that Devadatta, someone who persecuted him again and again, was *essential* to the Buddha's own enlightenment—for it was through persevering and not succumbing to his attacks that he was able to attain liberation.

In the "Never Disparaging" chapter of the Lotus Sūtra, the Buddha describes the sufferings of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, who was repeatedly abused and vilified, stoned and beaten by arrogant monks, nuns and lay believers, while ceaselessly striving (from a safe distance) to convey the tenet that all living beings possess the Buddha nature. This was a radical concept prior to the Lotus Sūtra. Because of the fundamental darkness innate in life, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging's assertion that everyone possesses the potential for enlightenment was inconceivable to those he encountered. They rejected this assertion because they rejected their own Buddha nature. No matter their actions, he revered each person, avowing that they were certain to attain Buddhahood. The Buddha then explains that he was Bodhisattva Never Disparaging in a previous lifetime. Nichiren Daishonin explained: "Bodhisattva Never Disparaging was persecuted because he lived in an evil age, but throughout his ordeals he never wavered in his belief in the Lotus Sūtra and its teaching that all living beings possess the Buddha nature."¹⁶ Because of his unremitting commitment to the bodhisattva way, he planted the seeds to be reborn as Shakyamuni Buddha.

Karma as Mission

His example can be viewed in two ways: first, that the karma he endured was the result of slandering the law in previous lifetimes; and second, that his

rebirth into a circumstance that compelled him to practice the bodhisattva way in the *saha*¹⁷ world which reviled him was an act of supreme devotion to enabling others to attain enlightenment. The chapter explains that as he predicted, all those who persecuted him were able to attain enlightenment in the future. Thus, the principle of voluntarily assuming the appropriate karma reorients karmic suffering as an expedient means that allows us to expiate any past grave offenses, fulfill the vow we made from time without beginning, and use our lives to help others realize that they possess the Buddha nature.

Nichiren Daishonin underwent countless such persecutions, for the sake of the Law; he was physically attacked and exiled several times, and at one point he was nearly beheaded. Rather than lament his trials, he writes of his profound jubilation in being able to “give his life” for the Lotus Sūtra.¹⁸ In the *goshō*, the Daishonin shows the way to overcome all hardship, to defeat the most punishing of trials that inevitably assail a true practitioner of the Law. Moreover, he shows the majestic heights a human being can ascend to, based on a vow to save all living beings. These are allegories for our infinite potential to transform not only our own lives, but also our society. In each of these examples, we see that the process of achieving enlightenment is inextricably tied to how we respond to the trials we undergo. Our behavior as human beings has the power to raise the human condition. This is our mission as bodhisattvas.

We practice Buddhism for the “peace and security” of the land, to establish “a harmonious and peaceful society that respects the sanctity of each person’s life.”¹⁹ This is a practice for people living and breathing and struggling to transform themselves and their environments—*esho funi*—while grappling with their own fundamental darkness and the darkness of the times. We practice *in society*, not away from it. Connecting the concept of *esho funi* and the Buddha’s correlation between our minds and our land, we see that our land is a reflection of the minds of all who dwell in it. Therefore, through transforming our minds and the minds of those around us, we can transform our land. The key to doing this is to enable ordinary beings to awaken to their innate Buddhahood, thus changing from deluded to enlightened. If I accept the core tenets of the Lotus Sūtra, I can see that my karma is the mission I have to elevate humanity. If I were not born as a Black person, I would not be compelled to demonstrate the power of the Lotus Sūtra to rewrite our history.

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At some point in the past two years, I realized that I didn’t need to know the “original cause” that created slavery—at the most basic level it can readily be

placed at the feet of our collective (Black/Native/white) slander of the Law. (The Daishonin and the Buddha, at various times, state that their suffering was not due to general causality, but rather to their slander of the Law in previous lifetimes.) The true question was, and is, how do we use this karma to transform humanity? Just as the Buddha liberated and elevated the minds of those who believed that it would take lifetimes to expiate one's negative karma and others who thought that women and numerous other classes of living beings could never attain enlightenment, we have a mission to change the perception that it will take another 400 years to change the karma of slavery and the hearts and minds of those who continue to wallow in their own inhumanity.

In short, our mission is to break the chains of fundamental darkness referred to as structural racism *through* persisting in our conviction that *all people*—even white oppressors—have a Buddha nature. This is the purpose of the “Devadatta” and the “Bodhisattva Never Disparaging” chapters in the Lotus Sūtra and of the chapter “On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime” in the goshō.

Conclusion

The impetus for this paper was fear. Throughout my life, I harbored a fear that my people had committed crimes so unspeakable that even the mere hint of them would be impossible to bear. Confronting this fear led to my initial question, “What was the cause of American slavery?” When I allowed myself to confront the concept of the “karma of slavery,” I initially recoiled in horror.

One could conjecture that Black folks enslaved others and were therefore enslaved in subsequent lives. This may have occurred; in fact, we know that state-sanctioned slavery (of an altogether different order) existed prior to Africa's colonization. But, as I researched, reflected, and meditated on my original question (and the angst it provoked), the question dramatically changed. I now see the unimaginable benefit in confronting the concept of the “karma of slavery.” For in this process, in this journey, I have come to see a purpose to my life and my suffering that I could never have imagined.

Our goal as Buddhists is to subdue our own fundamental darkness and to help others do the same. Our karma shows us our unique mission, the particular arena in which we must strive to elevate our lives and the lives of those around us. That arena may be an abusive family, addiction, homelessness, a life-threatening disease. Pinpointing or focusing on the specific cause of one's suffering is egregiously reductionist; it is as purposeful as blaming or shaming a victim of domestic violence. It has no power to transform the karmic effect or the lived experience.

In Nichiren Buddhism's paradigm of the causality of the Mystic Law, we come to see that we can use everything we suffer to awaken to our particular mission as bodhisattvas, to ignite and propel our bodhisattva practice, and to attain enlightenment in our present existence. Moreover, as the Buddha and the Daishonin amply demonstrate, there is no Buddha who is completely free of suffering—and in fact, were they free of suffering, they could never have attained enlightenment.

In our practice, we use our desire to be free of suffering to awaken to, and embrace, our fundamental enlightenment and that of others. Essential to this is that we confront and triumph over our fundamental darkness and the evil of the times. Daisaku Ikeda writes,

Fighting against evil in Buddhism is an important part of our Buddhist practice because if we fail to do so, we become accomplices to that evil. As long as Buddhism is a philosophy that teaches the inherent dignity of human life, it is crucial that its practitioners fight resolutely against those tendencies that promote disrespect for human life, discrimination and the destruction of life... It is vital that we fight against the poison of erroneous teachings or ways of thinking that cause people to lose sight of their Buddha nature and that destroy their humanity.²⁰

The internal and external resistance we meet in this enterprise is proof that we are practicing as the Buddha instructed. It is irrefutable proof that we are fulfilling the vow we made as Bodhisattvas of the Earth—a mission that only those of our particular heritage can fulfill.

The bodhisattva vow is an extension of the Buddha's vow, which he eloquently expressed in the line of the Lotus Sūtra that reads, "At all times I think to myself: How can I cause living beings to gain entry into the unsurpassed way and quickly acquire the body of a Buddha?"²¹ We, too, have made a great vow in the unimaginably distant past. Our present circumstance reveals that our vow was to elevate the very nature of what it means to be human—from self-preservation and self-interest (a life ruled by the three poisons of greed, anger and foolishness), to a state of life where we recognize every tribulation as an opportunity—a challenge—to save not only ourselves, but the human race from its self-destructive tendencies. When I consider the scale of our vow, as bodhisattvas of Black and/or Indigenous ancestry, it is truly awe-inspiring. Our mission, our vow, is nothing less than the emancipation of America from four hundred years of fundamental darkness.

This may seem like an impossible task. But I submit that we would not have this karma—and would not have encountered the Buddha's lifetime of teachings—if we were not capable of transforming it. We are the protagonists

of our lives and our age. The purpose of the Buddha's advent in the world was revealed in his behavior as a human being. The same can be said for our appearance in this time. How we respond to the karma of slavery has the capacity to be "like a lantern lighting up a place that has been dark for a hundred, a thousand, or ten thousand years."²²

Dedication

I dedicate this essay to all who came before me, those who were able to endure unspeakable horrors. They are the reason I developed an aspiration for the way.

TRACY WATSON is a graduate of American University School of International Service (MA International Development). She has served as a counselor in a foster care group home, as a job developer and grant writer for a community-based-organization's welfare-to-work program, co-founded a healing arts center in West Oakland, CA, served as a DC-based foreign affairs officer at the Department of State where she advocated for human rights in Syria, Iraq, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, and has served as a youth and women's division leader in her Buddhist community for over 25 years. Her two favorite things: chocolate and horror films.

NOTES

1. Daisaku Ikeda, *Buddhism Day by Day: Wisdom for Modern Life* (Santa Monica, CA: Middleway Press, 2006).
2. Daisaku Ikeda, *Learning from the Writings: The Hope-Filled Teachings of Nichiren Daishonin* (World Tribune Press, 2009), 69.
3. Daimoku—Myōhō-rengē-kyō—is the title of the Lotus Sūtra and its essence. When chanting, the word “Nam” (from the Sanskrit for devotion “*Namu*”) precedes Myōhō-rengē-kyō. Nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō translates as “Devotion to the mystic law of cause and effect through sound or teaching.”
4. In 13th-century Japan, Nichiren Daishonin, a Buddhist priest and religious reformer, established the chanting of Nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō as a universal and practical means of attaining enlightenment in one’s present lifetime. In Nichiren Buddhism, the Lotus Sūtra is viewed as the highest teaching of the Buddha.
5. *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin Volume I* (Soka Gakkai, 1999), 4.
6. “A Shared Commitment to Elevate Humanity,” *World Tribune*, (December 10, 2021), 9.
7. In the “Phantom City” chapter of the Lotus Sūtra of the Wonderful Law (The Lotus Sūtra), Shakyamuni Buddha (the Buddha) expounded the Law of the twelve-linked chain of causation: ignorance causes action; action causes consciousness; consciousness causes name and form; name and form cause the six sense organs; the six sense organs cause contact; contact causes sensation; sensation causes desire; desire causes attachment; attachment causes existence; existence causes birth; birth causes old age and death, worry and grief, suffering and anguish.
8. Ikeda, *Learning from the Writings*, 263.
9. The terms “unsurpassed Law,” “the Law,” and “Mystic Law” are used interchangeably in Nichiren Buddhism and the Lotus Sūtra.
10. *The Lotus Sutra*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 161-163.
11. *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin Volume I*, 279.
12. *Ibid.*, 85-91.
13. This concept was exemplified in the theory of “three thousand realms in a single moment of life” propagated by T’ien T’ai school during the Sui dynasty in China (538-597 CE). See: *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin Volume I*, 1279-1280.
14. *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin Volume I*, 4.
15. *The Lotus Sutra*, 184.
16. Ikeda, *Learning from the Writings*, 158.
17. Sanskrit for “endurance”—our present world which is full of sufferings to be endured.
18. *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin Volume I*, 196-199.
19. “A Shared Commitment to Elevate Humanity,” 9. See also: *The Lotus Sutra*, 60, 99, 137; *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin Volume I*, 6-30.
20. Ikeda, *Learning from the Writings*, 193-194.
21. *The Lotus Sutra*, 232.
22. *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin Volume I*, 932.

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