

What is the Nichiren perspective is on ego or no self. I don't totally get it. Is the aim to fully dissolve the personal self? Is it an illusion we have an ego? Are we to upgrade the self or see it as non-existent? I've never fully understood this topic.

This is an interesting question and illustrates the confusion that can develop when we have heard the ideas of another form of Buddhism and don't know how they equate to our own practice. Your question is relating to the Theravada or Tibetan form of Buddhism.

Theravada Buddhism – View of Desires

In that form, earthly desires and the cycle of birth and death are seen as sources of suffering and obstacles to enlightenment. The goal of this form is to eliminate all desires and end the cycle of death and rebirth or enter nirvana. Nirvana in this form is extinction, emancipation cessation and non-rebirth. Dict of Buddhism, p. 458.

The goal of practice can only be achieved at death, when both body and mind, the sources of suffering are extinguished.

Theravada Buddhism believed Shakyamuni lived at a level way above ordinary people, so ordinary people couldn't attain Buddhahood.

Their goal was the highest state was that of arhat. A arhat is one who has attained the highest of the four stages that voice hearers aim to achieve. The arhat no longer has the illusions of thought and desire and has freed himself from rebirth in the six lower paths. Dict of Buddhism, p. 23.

Small numbers of monks, who withdrew into mountain top monasteries practiced towards this end.

Mahayana Buddhism - View of Desires

In Mahayana Buddhism our branch, desires are seen as a function of life. They can be used as steppingstones to enlightenment, when we chant about them based on the Mystic Law. The energy of earthly desires can be elevated and transformed into shining wisdom and compassion and can be redirected to a higher level that transcends the individual and benefits others, the community and society. So you don't try to rid yourself of desires. You transmute them.

Nichiren Buddhism teaches that every person has the Buddha nature and can become enlightened as Shakyamuni did.

In Nichiren Buddhism, the Lotus Sutra teaches that by awakening to one's Buddha nature, one can reach nirvana in one's present form. It is not a cessation of birth and death, but rather a state of enlightenment experienced as one repeats the cycle of birth and death. Enlightenment is something every individual has the capacity to achieve.

Nichiren Buddhists do not retreat from the world, but practice engaged Buddhism. This practice plants one's feet firmly in this world.

Before becoming enlightened, Shakayamuni put himself through some pretty arduous practices designed to eliminate desires and almost ended up dying. When you think about it the desire to live and care for oneself is a desire and if you eliminate the desire to live you die.

The Nine levels of Consciousness

Before we can discuss the ego and the greater self, I want to discuss the nine levels of consciousness as taught in Nichiren Buddhism. Heritage of the Ultimate Law of life, p. 92

The first five are the levels of the senses. The 6th is a level of mind that integrates and evaluates what the senses have brought, to create understanding of the physical environment.

The seventh level is one of inner-directed awareness wherein the understanding of and attachment to the concept of self arises.

The eighth is the storehouse of past causes from this life and previous lives.

The ninth is the level of pure consciousness free from any karmic defilement. It is “the unchanging reality that rules over all of life’s functions” *The Real Aspect of the Gohonzon, WND -1, 832* This is the amala-consciousness and represents the Mystic Law or Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. For a fuller discussion on the Mystic Law go to my vlog “Why Is It Important to Have Faith in the Gohonzon?” at <https://wp.me/p3V1J9-110>

Therevada Buddhism - View of the Ego

The way I see it Therevada Buddhists were trying to rid themselves of the ego with its attachment to desires and thus to suffering. They wanted to raise their level of consciousness in order to live in that level of pure consciousness, the non-self, the transcendental field underlying the phenomenal world and the basis of everything. Long hours of meditation were devoted to this but to focus one’s awareness there mean’t that you couldn’t function in the world, but had to retreat from the world to live in a monastery in the mountains.

The first eight levels of consciousness stop functioning when we die. At that time our individual manifestation in the material world ends. This is like the wave returning into the ocean. In death, our awareness returns to the expanded level of amala-consciousness, the Mystic Law. Our awareness once again becomes the ocean. It appears that Theravada Buddhists were trying to live at level of life

Mahayana Buddhism - View of the Ego

The Lesser Self

The ego is considered the lesser self. It has a narrow self-interest, focused on personal desires. The ego lives in the lower worlds and is lacking in compassion. The individual living in the lesser self has a sense of separation, of having to be on his/her own. The ego doesn't have access to the ocean of wisdom but possesses only limited wisdom. It is subject to negativity, ingratitude and has no awareness of its connection with the Mystic Law. When we are living in the lesser self we are living in fundamental darkness.

When living in the lesser self, you are buffeted by the ups and downs of life and live with fears. You constantly react to praise and censure.

The Greater Self

When we are living in the greater self, we are fully aware of and base our actions on the Mystic Law. It is a state of "boundless freedom that pervades the entire universe." When living in the greater self we become compassionate and have concern for others wanting to relieve them of suffering. We regard the happiness of others as our own. When the self is based on the Mystic law, "The energy of earthly desires can be elevated and transformed into shining wisdom and compassion; it can be powerfully redirected to a higher level that transcends the individual and benefits everyone around them." *The Wisdom for Creating Happiness and Peace, part 2, 47-49.* When living in the greater self, the individual treasures the law more highly than their own life.

The greater self is not swayed by changing phenomena and is not subject to the ups and downs of life, as the self is grounded in the eternal unchanging law. You live boundless appreciation at the core of your life and you have awakened to the fact that you are eternal.

When you live in the greater self you have access to an ocean of wisdom which flows in your life. You live in a state of freedom as vast as the universe, imparting joy to everyone around you.

Nichiren Buddhism does not teach a doctrine of non self. Instead it teaches that one should illuminate ones life through tapping into the Mystic Law. Base one's life on the 9th consciousness and act in the 6th. As the level of self-identity the 7th level is formed when we are born, it is needed to function in this world. But the ego can be lived at lower or higher levels.

As we chant and connect with the Mystic Law day after day, our lesser self gradually opens into the greater self. spontaneously and naturally. You don't have to go through arduous practices. When we tap into the amala-consciousness we illuminate the other levels of consciousness as we take action for our own happiness and that of others.

Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life, p. 92

Summary:

To summarize, in Nichiren Buddhism you don't have to go through arduous practices to elevate the lesser self into the greater. Nor do you have to retreat from the world. You don't have to spend hours and hours in meditation. Instead, you tap into the Mystic Law day after day and illuminate the lesser self with the light of the Mystic Law. Although you can go back and forth between the lesser and greater selves, I believe that over time, you live longer and longer periods in the greater self.

Other Vlogs of Interest

1. "Why Is It Important to Have Faith in the Gohonzon?" " <https://wp.me/p3V1J9-110>
2. Know the wonderful Cluster of Blessings Brought by Nam-myoho-renge-kyo? <https://wp.me/p3V1J9-Ww>
3. Steps to forge Your Faith <https://wp.me/p3V1J9-VX>

Comments;

As always I am interested in what you have to say.

See you in two weeks.