

July Discussion Topic - The Three Obstacles and Four Devils

The Buddhist concept of the “three obstacles and four devils”¹ teaches us how to recognise and overcome difficult situations. These are negative functions that appear within us or in our environment trying to hinder or undermine the high, positive life-state we have developed through our practice. They weaken our determination to fight for our own happiness and that of others, causing our courage and wisdom to fade.

SGI president Daisaku Ikeda says: “Demons or devilish functions represent the workings of earthly desires and illusions that try to confuse the minds of those who seek enlightenment. Sometimes these devilish functions take the form of hunger or sleepiness. At other times, they torment our minds with anxiety, fear, and doubt. When people are led astray by such functions, they always find some way to justify their actions. They convince themselves that their excuses are completely reasonable and justified.”²

The ‘true identity’ of devilish functions is fundamental darkness or ignorance which inherently exists within our lives. Fundamental darkness means ignorance of the Mystic Law and the true nature of life. It tries to deny the noble potential for Buddhahood that exists in all people. Buddhism is a battle between the Buddha (our Buddha nature) and the devil (our fundamental darkness). By recognising the three obstacles and four devils, confronting them and triumphing over them we attain Buddhahood.

The three obstacles and four devils are: The ‘**obstacle of earthly desires**’, which appears when a person’s mind or will is most vulnerable. The three poisons of greed, anger and foolishness are often cited as examples of earthly desires, but arrogance, doubt and distrust also belong to this category. The ‘**obstacle of karma**’, may appear in the form of a family member, partner or children who obstruct our practice. The ‘**obstacle of retribution**’ refers to hindrances that arise as karmic consequences of causes made in past lives. Hindrances caused, by one’s superiors, parents or other authority figures, should be seen as obstacle of karmic retribution, as we are born into specific circumstances due to our own karma.

‘Devils’ are also known as ‘robbers of good fortune’ and the ‘robbers of life’. The four devils are: **The devil of earthly desires**, hindrances caused by the three poisons of greed, anger, and foolishness. **The devil of the five components**³, hindrances arising from one’s own physical and mental functions. **The devil of death**, the obstacle that results from one’s own death or the death of someone close, which can cause us to lose faith. **The devil of the sixth heaven**, representing negative forces that manipulate others for their own gain. These can include influential people who discourage us from continuing our Buddhist practice, thereby keeping us trapped in suffering.

Nichiren Daishonin often wrote that these hindrances appear “in confusing form,” making their influence difficult to recognise. It’s essential that we learn to identify them and develop the strength to overcome them. Otherwise, we risk becoming fearful or being swayed by them. More important than classifying our problems under a specific obstacle or devil is

¹ The word devil has nothing to do with a creature with horns. It represents all the negative functions that hinder our enlightenment.

² SGI Newsletter 9238.

³ The five components are: 1. Form: the body and the five sense organs (sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch). 2. Perception: the receiving and integrating of information through the mind which functions as the sixth sense. 3. Conception: the creating of ideas. 4. Volition: the motivation to act based on information and ideas. 5. Consciousness: the discernment from which perception, conception and volition arise.

recognising whatever is hindering our Buddhist practice, confronting it, and overcoming it with our faith, prayer, and action. By learning how to defeat our inner darkness - our ignorance - we can definitely become happy.

- Why is it so important to recognise devilish functions?
- How do you challenge yourself to recognise and overcome the devilish functions? Do you have any experience with this?
- Do you sometimes let fear influence you? How have you overcome it with your Buddhist practice?