

Wednesday, April 30, 2008

SGI President Ikeda's Study Lecture Series

LEARNING FROM THE GOSHO: THE HOPE-FILLED WRITINGS OF NICHIREN DAISHONIN

[7] “The Dragon Gate”

“My Wish Is That All My Disciples Make a Great Vow”—Carrying On the Great Vow for the Happiness of All Humanity

A waterfall called the Dragon Gate exists in China. Its waters plunge a hundred feet, swifter than an arrow shot by a strong warrior. It is said that a great many carp gather in the basin below, hoping to climb the falls, and that any that succeeds will turn into a dragon. Not a single carp, however, out of a hundred, a thousand, or even ten thousand, can climb the falls, not even after ten or twenty years. Some are swept away by the strong currents, some fall prey to eagles, hawks, kites, and owls, and others are netted, scooped up, or even shot with arrows by fishermen who line both banks of the falls ten *cho* wide. Such is the difficulty a carp faces in becoming a dragon. . . .

Attaining Buddhahood is no easier than for men of low status to enter court circles, or for carp to climb the Dragon Gate. Shariputra, for example, practiced bodhisattva austerities for sixty kalpas in order to attain Buddhahood, but finally could persevere no longer and slipped back into the paths of the two vehicles. Even some of those who formed ties with the Lotus Sutra in the days of the Buddha Great Universal Wisdom Excellence sank into the sufferings of birth and death for the duration of major world system dust particle kalpas. Some others who received the seeds of Buddhahood in the even more remote past suffered for the length of numberless major world system dust particle kalpas. All these people practiced the Lotus Sutra, but when harassed in one way or another by the devil king of the sixth heaven, who had taken possession of their rulers and other authorities, they backslid and forsook their faith, and thus wandered among the six paths for countless kalpas.

Until recently these events seemed to have had no bearing on us, but now we find ourselves facing the same kind of ordeal. My wish is that all my disciples make a great vow. We are very fortunate to be alive after the widespread epidemics that occurred last year and the year before. But now with the impending Mongol invasion it appears

that few will survive. In the end, no one can escape death. The sufferings at that time will be exactly like what we are experiencing now. Since death is the same in either case, you should be willing to offer your life for the Lotus Sutra. Think of this offering as a drop of dew rejoining the ocean, or a speck of dust returning to the earth. A passage from the third volume of the Lotus Sutra reads, “We beg that the merit gained through these gifts may be spread far and wide to everyone, so that we and other living beings all together may attain the Buddha way” [LS7, 130].

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The sixth day of the eleventh month

Reply to Ueno the Worthy

I write this letter in deep gratitude for your dedication throughout the events at Atsuhara. (WND-1, 1002–03)

Lecture

The youth are the “pillar” that will shoulder world peace. The youth are the “eyes” that will open the future of humanity. The youth are the “great ship” that will lead all people to happiness.¹ Now more than ever, the times call for an alliance of courageous youth who will stand up for truth and justice. Young people are the hope of tomorrow. A society’s future is bright when its youth are filled with passion and enthusiasm and cherish lofty ideals. Young people shape the times. That is why it is our mission and responsibility as Buddhists to foster youth who are able to take on that task.

It is also especially crucial for us in the SGI to ensure a steady flow of youthful successors who can keenly perceive the pain and suffering of the times and pioneer a new age. This is the only way we will be able to accomplish the noble endeavor of kosen-rufu. Consequently, genuine leaders of kosen-rufu foster young people and entrust everything to them.

We need to maintain a youthful spirit ourselves and strive together with the youth; we need to nurture young people and confidently bequeath the future to them. Those who consistently work together with the youth to realize noble shared goals are victors who possess a lofty spirit. In contrast, those who use or exploit young people

¹ Here, President Ikeda is echoing Nichiren Daishonin declaration: “I will be the pillar of Japan. I will be the eyes of Japan. I will be the great ship of Japan. This is my vow, and I will never forsake it!” (WND-1, 280–81).

demonstrate the behavior of arrogant, high-handed dictators or lazy, incompetent cowards.

The main theme of the Lotus Sutra centers around Shakyamuni transmitting the Law to his true successors and entrusting them with the mission to widely propagate it after his passing. Similarly, in the Gosho, we see Nichiren Daishonin praying unceasingly for “[those] who can inherit the soul of the Lotus Sutra” (WND-1, 839), earnestly wishing for his followers’ health and victory, safety and longevity, and success and growth. His letters abound with instructive and encouraging words for the disciples who will succeed him.

In this profoundly significant month [March 2008] in which we celebrate the 50th anniversary of March 16, Kosen-rufu Day²—a day of passing the baton from mentor to disciples—I would like to study the Daishonin’s writing “The Dragon Gate” to delve into the deep meaning of this life-to-life transmission. This is a fervent letter that the Daishonin sent to Nanjo Tokimitsu,³ who was then a 21-year-old youth struggling to protect his fellow believers amid the intense pressures of the Atsuvara Persecution.⁴

In this letter, the Daishonin proclaims: “My wish is that all my disciples make a great vow” (WND-1, 1002). This “great vow” is the great vow of the Buddha—which is ultimately the great vow for kosen-rufu, as the Daishonin indicates when he says: “The ‘great vow’ refers to the propagation of the Lotus Sutra” (OTT, 82). And it is the noble vow reflected in the Daishonin’s own declaration in “The Opening of the Eyes”: “Here I will make a great vow. . . . I will be the pillar of Japan. I will be the eyes of Japan. I will be the great ship of Japan. This is my vow, and I will never forsake it!” (WND-1, 280–81).

In his personal copy of the Daishonin’s writings, first Soka Gakkai president Tsunesaburo Makiguchi double-underlined the passage, “Here I will make a great vow,” and also wrote “great vow” in large characters in the margin next to it. He lived out his life true to this great vow, never succumbing to the persecution of Japan’s militarist authorities. A letter that Mr. Makiguchi sent to his family from prison just a

² On March 16, 1958, second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda entrusted the future of kosen-rufu to President Ikeda and the members of the youth division. This date is commemorated annually in the Soka Gakkai as Kosen-rufu Day.

³ Nanjo Tokimitsu (1259–1332): A staunch follower of the Daishonin and the steward of Ueno Village in Fuji District of Suruga Province (part of present-day Shizuoka Prefecture). During the Atsuvara Persecution, he used his influence to protect his fellow practitioners, sheltering some in his home.

⁴ Atsuvara Persecution: A series of threats and acts of violence against followers of Nichiren Daishonin in Atsuvara Village in Fuji District, beginning around 1275 and continuing until around 1283. A pivotal event took place on September 21, 1279, when 20 of the Daishonin’s farmer believers were arrested on false charges and sent for trial to Kamakura. There, the deputy chief of the Office of Military and Police Affairs, Hei no Saemon, tried to force them to recant their faith. They refused, and three of them were subsequently beheaded.

month before he passed away conveys the serene state of mind of one who has truly dedicated his life to spreading the Mystic Law. He wrote: “It is only natural that the three obstacles and four devils should have assailed me; it is just as the sutra states.”⁵

Josei Toda, his disciple and future second Soka Gakkai president, meanwhile accompanied Mr. Makiguchi to prison, carrying out a two-year struggle behind bars before standing up alone in the ravaged landscape of postwar Japan to rebuild the Soka Gakkai. His deep resolve is expressed in the Gakkai song he wrote, titled “Song of Comrades”:

I now receive the Buddha's decree
and stand up alone,
proudly upholding the great vow
to spread the Mystic Law.
Allies are few, enemies many.

Mr. Toda also declared: “No matter what enormous hardships might arise, I will never forsake the great vow for kosen-rufu. . . . I will do what I have to do—that is, strive to save the poor and the sick and those who are suffering. For that purpose, I will keep speaking out with all my might”⁶

In my youth, I stood up alone as Mr. Toda's loyal disciple and did everything I could to support and assist him. In the course of those struggles, I inherited this great vow from my mentor. The great vow for kosen-rufu is inherited only through the joint struggle of mentor and disciple.

My spirit of waging a shared struggle with my mentor has continued to this very day. There has never been a day when Mr. Toda was absent from my heart. I have lived my life these past 50 years with a vow and commitment as if each day were March 16.

My keenest wish now, the area where I am challenging myself most, is to enable all people, particularly the youth, to savor and shine with the deep and abiding joy that comes from dedicating one's life to the great vow for kosen-rufu. I wish this especially for the youth, since it is to them whom we must entrust the future.

In “The Dragon Gate,” which we will study this time, the Daishonin is making an ardent appeal for his young disciple to arouse a great vow for kosen-rufu and carry on his struggle. Let us learn from this writing, which can be taken as a source of inspiration for the spirit of March 16, Kosen-rufu Day.

⁵ Translated from Japanese. Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, *Makiguchi Tsunesaburo Zenshu* (Collected Writings of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi) (Tokyo: Daisanbunmei-sha, 1987), vol. 10, p. 301.

⁶ Translated from Japanese. Josei Toda, *Toda Josei Zenshu* (Collected Writings of Josei Toda) (Tokyo: Seikyo Shimbunsha, 1989), vol. 4, pp. 61–62.

A waterfall called the Dragon Gate exists in China. Its waters plunge a hundred feet, swifter than an arrow shot by a strong warrior. It is said that a great many carp gather in the basin below, hoping to climb the falls, and that any that succeeds will turn into a dragon. Not a single carp, however, out of a hundred, a thousand, or even ten thousand, can climb the falls, not even after ten or twenty years. Some are swept away by the strong currents, some fall prey to eagles, hawks, kites, and owls, and others are netted, scooped up, or even shot with arrows by fishermen who line both banks of the falls ten *cho* wide. Such is the difficulty a carp faces in becoming a dragon. . . .

Attaining Buddhahood is no easier than for men of low status to enter court circles, or for carp to climb the Dragon Gate. (WND-1, 1002)

Buddhahood Is Attained through Surmounting Difficulties

Nanjo Tokimitsu stood up valiantly to confront the harsh oppression directed toward the Daishonin's followers during the Atsuvara Persecution. "The Dragon Gate" is the title of a letter that the Daishonin, then 58, wrote to his young disciple on November 6, 1279.

Tokimitsu was a youthful successor who had started practicing the Daishonin's Buddhism as a child. From his teens, he looked up to the Daishonin's leading disciple Nikko Shonin as an elder brother, seeking him out for guidance and instruction. Throughout his life, Tokimitsu continued to work tirelessly to propagate the Mystic Law.

This letter was written at the very height of the Atsuvara Persecution. At great personal risk, the 21-year-old Tokimitsu bravely protected his fellow practitioners, offering a number of them shelter in his own home. This led to his being targeted by the authorities in various ways. A short time later, they unjustly levied heavy taxes against him. Eventually, he found himself in a situation where he could not even afford a horse for himself, and had difficulty adequately clothing his wife and children. In this letter, the Daishonin refers to Tokimitsu [who was also known as Ueno after the village where he lived]—as "Ueno the Worthy" in praise of his dauntless struggle for justice in the face of all obstacles.

In the postscript to this letter, the Daishonin speaks of his gratitude or wonderment. The original Japanese is vague, and it thus is difficult to interpret the true meaning. One way the sentence can be read is: "I write this letter in deep gratitude for your dedication throughout the events at Atsuvara" (WND-1, 1003). That is, as words

praising Tokimitsu for his efforts during the Atsuhsara Persecution and thanking him for his devotion. However, it can also be read as: “I write this letter in profound wonderment at the events at Atsuhsara.” That is, as an expression of the Daishonin’s awe and wonder at the fact that ordinary farmer believers in Atsuhsara were now actually demonstrating their willingness to lay down their lives for their faith in the same selfless spirit that he himself possessed. In that sense, this letter could be regarded as the Daishonin’s response to all the Atsuhsara followers who had aroused such deep faith, and that he addressed it to Tokimitsu as their representative.

In either case, it is a writing in which the Daishonin praises the selfless efforts of successors, and teaches that the great vow or shared commitment of mentor and disciple pulses in this way of practice.

The Tale of the Dragon Gate

In this letter, the Daishonin emphasizes that attaining Buddhahood entails overcoming many hurdles and difficulties. To make his point, he draws analogies from the ancient Chinese tale of the Dragon Gate waterfall and the history of the Taira clan in Japan. He also gives an example from the Buddhist scriptures on the difficulty of attaining Buddhahood, citing the story of how Shariputra, one of Shakyamuni’s ten major disciples, regressed in his Buddhist practice in a past existence.

The Dragon Gate is a legendary waterfall in China. Some sources place its location on the upper or middle reaches of the Yellow River. It was held that carp that managed to climb the falls would become dragons. In this letter, the Daishonin describes the Dragon Gate as being 100 feet (30 meters) high and ten *cho* (1.1 kilometers or 0.6 miles) wide. In some of his other writings [e.g., “Letter to Akimoto” (WND-1, 1021ff) and “Climbing Up Dragon Gate” (WND-2, 673ff)], he describes it as being 1,000 feet (300 meters) high and located on Mount T’ien-t’ai.⁷ Given these divergences, it is difficult for us to come up with a definitive picture of the falls. Be that as it may, however, the story goes that the force of the current is so intense that most of the carp are unsuccessful in their attempts to climb the falls, no matter how many times they try. Moreover, birds of prey and fishermen lie in wait to catch them. Only a carp that can overcome all of these challenges and reach the top of the waterfall can become a dragon with the power to control the rain and thunderclouds. This story is related in the Chinese historical text, *The Book of the Later Han*. In many countries in the East to this day, the expression “climbing the Dragon Gate” is used to indicate surmounting difficult hurdles or high barriers to gain success in society or one’s

⁷ Mount T’ien-t’ai: A mountain in Zhejiang Province in China where the Great Teacher T’ient’ai lived and where the T’ient’ai school was based. Both the name of the school and of its founder derive from this mountain. Mount T’ient’ai prospered as a center of Chinese Buddhism, and a number of temples were built there.

profession.

Through this example, the Daishonin highlights for Tokimitsu that remaining steadfast in one's Buddhist practice to the very end is an undertaking fraught with as many difficulties as a carp faces in climbing the Dragon Gate and turning into a dragon. The strong currents of the waterfall that drive the fish back can be likened to the conditions of an evil age defiled by the five impurities⁸ as described in the Lotus Sutra; while the birds of prey and fishermen can be likened to the three obstacles and four devils⁹ and the three powerful enemies¹⁰ that hinder one's efforts to attain Buddhahood.

Persevering in faith in the evil age of the Latter Day of the Law is like swimming upstream against a powerful current. It is hard enough just to resist the insidious forces exerted by our own earthly desires¹¹ and fundamental darkness.¹² Shakyamuni compared these forces to a strong current or flood.¹³ The Daishonin explains that this is even more true in the Latter Day, when even seemingly remarkable human wisdom, ingenuity, or know-how can be inundated by an inexorable tide of deluded impulses fueled by the three poisons of greed, anger, and foolishness—an ever-growing tide that wreaks havoc as a force of evil (WND-1, 1121).¹⁴

⁸ Five impurities: The impurities of the age, of desire, of living beings, of view, and of life span. They are mentioned in the "Expedient Means" (2nd) chapter of the Lotus Sutra.

⁹ Three obstacles and four devils: Various obstacles and hindrances to the practice of Buddhism. The three obstacles are: (1) the obstacle of earthly desires; (2) the obstacle of karma; and (3) the obstacle of retribution. The four devils are: (1) the hindrance of the five components; (2) the hindrance of earthly desires; (3) the hindrance of death; and (4) the hindrance of the devil king.

¹⁰ Three powerful enemies: Three types of arrogant people who persecute those who propagate the Lotus Sutra in the evil age after Shakyamuni Buddha's death, described in a 20-line verse section of the "Encouraging Devotion" (13th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra. The Great Teacher Miao-lo of China summarizes them as arrogant lay people, arrogant priests, and arrogant false sages.

¹¹ Earthly desires: Also, illusions, defilements, impurities, earthly passions, or simply desires. A generic term for all the workings of life that cause one psychological and physical suffering and impede the quest for enlightenment, including desires and illusions in the general sense. Earthly desires are also referred to as fetters or bonds (Skt *samyojana* or *bandhana*), because they bind people to the realm of delusion and suffering. Buddhism regards them as the fundamental cause for affliction and suffering. *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* by Nagarjuna says that the three poisons of greed, anger, and foolishness are the most fundamental earthly desires and give rise to all others.

¹² Fundamental darkness: Also, fundamental ignorance or primal ignorance. The most deeply rooted illusion inherent in life, said to give rise to all other illusions. Darkness in this sense means inability to see or recognize the truth, particularly, that the Buddha nature is inherent in one's life.

¹³ The Buddha states to the effect that people who give up craving, people whose hearts are free of taints, can be called people who have crossed the strong current or flood of earthly desires. [See *The Group of Discourses (Sutta-nipata)*, translated by K. R. Norman (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1995), vol. 2, p. 122 (No. 1082); cf. *Buddha no Kotoba—Suttanipata* (Words of the Buddha—Sutta-nipata), translated by Hajime Nakamura (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1994), p. 228.]

¹⁴ The Daishonin writes: "Thus, the extremity of greed, anger, and foolishness in people's hearts in the impure world of the latter age makes it difficult for any worthy or sage to control. This is

Precisely because it is so difficult to carry out faith in the Mystic Law in such an age, the bonds of mentor and disciple in Buddhism take on a decisive importance. Likewise, a harmonious community of fellow practitioners solidly united in purpose—in what the Daishonin terms as “the spirit of many in body, one in mind”—is also indispensable. The Soka Gakkai possesses the bonds of mentor and disciple that are strong enough to withstand any adversity. And its members—noble ordinary people who are polishing their lives by striving in faith with the same commitment as their mentor—are allied together in solid unity. Moreover, countless members, like magnificent dragons born through the triumphant ascent of the waterfall, are leading lives of profound dignity and confidence forged through continually challenging themselves in their faith and self-development.

President Makiguchi’s Efforts to Provide Personal Encouragement

In 1939, Mr. Makiguchi made his first visit to the city of Yame in Fukuoka Prefecture, Kyushu (the southernmost of Japan’s four main islands), for the purpose of sharing the Daishonin’s Buddhism with others. During that trip, he also spoke about the Daishonin’s writing “Climbing Up Dragon Gate” (WND-2, 673). Talking to a woman who had just decided to follow her husband in becoming a Soka Gakkai member, Mr. Makiguchi said: “You must overcome various hardships and become a splendidly capable person. No matter what might happen, never abandon your faith.” And the next day, saying, “Let’s not waste any time putting this into practice,” he took the couple with him to visit an acquaintance who lived in the Unzen area of neighboring Nagasaki Prefecture, personally showing them how to introduce others to Buddhism. Mr. Makiguchi used to say: “Propagation is the essence of religion. A life devoted to benefiting others represents great good.”

Back in those days, just the train journey from Tokyo to Yame took more than 24 hours. Nevertheless, Mr. Makiguchi traveled to Yame again the following year, and again the year after that, holding discussion meetings there. He would go anywhere if it would help even one person or youth.

Mr. Makiguchi also once traveled alone to Koriyama in Fukushima Prefecture (in the northeastern region of Japan’s main island of Honshu) to introduce the Daishonin’s Buddhism to the parents of a young man in Tokyo who had taken faith. And he pursued this course even as he faced increasing pressure from the militarist authorities.

When Mr. Makiguchi set out for one destination, he would never just stop there.

because, though the Buddha cured greed with the medicine of the meditation on the vileness of the body, healed anger with the meditation on compassion for all, and treated foolishness with the meditation on the twelve-linked chain of causation, teaching these doctrines now makes people worse and compounds their greed, anger, and foolishness. For example, fire is extinguished by water, and evil is defeated by good. In contrast, however, if water is poured on fire that has emerged from water, it would be as if one had poured oil, producing an even greater conflagration” (WND-1, 1121).

Instead, he would eagerly make his way from there to a new area, seeking to enable people to form a connection with Buddhism and to find new capable people for kosen-rufu.

The “great vow” of Buddhism can only be actualized through the persistent challenge of going out into society and earnestly seeking to do whatever we can to inspire and encourage each person we encounter, leaving no stone unturned, so to speak. That is why both Mr. Makiguchi and Mr. Toda placed such great importance on one-on-one dialogue and discussion meetings. To continue reaching out in dialogue to the person right in front of us and conveying through our spirit and lives the greatness of the Mystic Law, which is the key to genuine happiness—that is the way to truly fulfill the great vow for kosen-rufu.

Destruction Takes But an Instant; Construction Requires an All-out Struggle

There are a great many obstacles to successfully carrying out one’s Buddhist practice.

Following his description of the Dragon Gate, the Daishonin offers another example, this time relating to the history of the Taira, or Heike, clan in Japan. The clan’s members started out as lowly gatekeepers of the imperial palace, and it took generations of devoted service before they eventually gained the status to enter court circles. A period of 250 years passed before the clan at last achieved its zenith during the time of Taira no Kiyomori [the first samurai to hold the highest office in the imperial government].¹⁵ But as suggested by the famous line in Japanese literature, “Unless a man is a Heike [a member of the Taira clan], he is not a human being,”¹⁶ the despotic conduct of the Taira stood out. They also lacked people of outstanding character and ability. As a result, within several years of Kiyomori’s death, the Taira were completely destroyed.

Destruction takes but an instant, while construction requires an all-out struggle. This applies equally to any organization or individual. When the tireless and dedicated spirit of construction is forgotten, collapse begins, quickly leading to ruin. It only takes a moment.

The Soka Gakkai must never forget the spirit of construction. We must never lose the fundamental spirit to strive for people’s happiness and to open the way for the youth. Following the Soka path of mentor and disciple means engraving this spirit deep in our lives and making it shine into the eternal future.

Decline is brought about by arrogance, ingratitude, and bureaucratism. The only

¹⁵ Taira no Kiyomori (1118–81): Leader of the Taira, or Heike, clan. After achieving political preeminence, he dominated the imperial court. He married his daughter to the emperor and eventually installed his grandson as emperor.

¹⁶ This is a quote attributed to Tokitada no Taira (1130–89), Kiyomori’s brother-in-law. From *The Tale of the Heike*, translated by Hiroshi Kitagawa and Bruce T. Tsuchida (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1975), vol. 1, p. 16.

way to vanquish these obstacles is for disciples to make the mentor's heart their own and throw themselves into the challenge.

After relating the two examples of the waterfall and the Taira clan, the Daishonin concludes: "Attaining Buddhahood is no easier than for men of low status to enter court circles, or for carp to climb the Dragon Gate" (WND-1, 1002).

Precisely because his followers were undergoing a period of intense, life-threatening persecution by the ruling authorities, the Daishonin taught Tokimitsu the unflinching attitude in faith that the times demanded. He explains in stark terms just how exacting the path to attaining Buddhahood is. The fact that he does so is perhaps also an indication of his profound trust and high aspirations for his young disciple.

Shariputra, for example, practiced bodhisattva austerities for sixty kalpas in order to attain Buddhahood, but finally could persevere no longer and slipped back into the paths of the two vehicles.¹⁷ Even some of those who formed ties with the Lotus Sutra in the days of the Buddha Great Universal Wisdom Excellence sank into the sufferings of birth and death for the duration of major world system dust particle kalpas. Some others who received the seeds of Buddhahood in the even more remote past suffered for the length of numberless major world system dust particle kalpas. All these people practiced the Lotus Sutra, but when harassed in one way or another by the devil king of the sixth heaven, who had taken possession of their rulers and other authorities, they backslid and forsook their faith, and thus wandered among the six paths for countless kalpas. (WND-1, 1002–03)

Be Wary of Negative Influences, or “Evil Friends”

Next, citing examples from the sutras, the Daishonin mentions the difficulty of continuing one's Buddhist practice. The point stressed here is the fearful nature of negative influences, or what Buddhism refers to as “evil friends.”¹⁸

¹⁷ This story is found in *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*. Once, when Shariputra was engaged in offering alms as part of his bodhisattva practice in a previous existence, a Brahman begged him for his eye. Shariputra gave it to him, but the Brahman was so revolted by its smell that he dropped it on the ground and trampled on it. Seeing this, Shariputra discontinued his bodhisattva practice, retreating into the Hinayana teachings, or the way of voice-hearers, and failed to attain Buddhahood.

¹⁸ Evil friends: Also, evil companion or evil teacher. One who causes others to fall into the evil paths by misleading them in connection with Buddhism. Evil friends refer to those who influence or approach other people with the intention of leading them away from correct Buddhist practice and to an erroneous teaching.

In a past existence, Shariputra, despite being an advanced practitioner who had endured countless austerities, regressed in faith because he allowed himself to be swayed by such an external influence. In his case, he was influenced by a Brahman who begged for his eye and then trampled on it. As a result, Shariputra decided that people such as this were too difficult to save and gave up his desire to follow the bodhisattva way.

Such negative influences, or evil friends, are essentially the workings of the devil king of the sixth heaven.¹⁹ The reality of the devil king is the fundamental darkness that is inherent in our lives and those of others.

Here, the devil king, manifesting in the form of the eye-begging Brahman, succeeded in swaying Shariputra's mind. The Daishonin also spoke of the devil king taking possession of rulers and other authorities and causing various practitioners of the Lotus Sutra to regress and abandon their faith. Even those who had formed direct ties to the Lotus Sutra and Shakyamuni in the remote past sank into the sufferings of birth and death for the staggeringly long duration of major world system dust particle kalpas or numberless major world system dust particle kalpas due to having been led astray by this devil (See WND-1, 1003).

The Daishonin had long been warning Tokimitsu about the fearfulness of negative influences, or evil friends. Explaining, for example, that evil friends may approach in the form of allies, he instructed his young disciple to summon strong faith when they appeared in his environment. By doing so, he says, the heavenly deities, or the positive functions in the universe, would surely lend their protection.²⁰

Incidentally, the Tang dynasty poet Bai Juyi²¹ wrote a well-known poem related to the Dragon Gate. It tells the story of a carp that attempted to climb the waterfall but fell back and, having cut its forehead on the rocks below, decided to abandon the

¹⁹ Devil king of the sixth heaven: Also, devil king or heavenly devil. The king of devils, who dwells in the highest or the sixth heaven of the world of desire. He is also named Freely Enjoying Things Conjured by Others, the king who makes free use of the fruits of others' efforts for his own pleasure. Served by innumerable minions, he obstructs Buddhist practice and delights in sapping the life force of other beings.

²⁰ In "The Source of Aniruddha's Good Fortune," the Daishonin writes: "When those who are vital to your interests [that is, people who are important to you] try to prevent you from upholding your faith, or you are faced with great obstacles, you must believe that [Buddhist gods such as] king Brahma and others will without fail fulfill their vow [to protect the practitioners of the Lotus Sutra], and strengthen your faith more than ever. . . . If people try to hinder your faith, I urge you strongly to feel joy" (WND-2, 566). And in "The Workings of Brahma and Shakra," he says: "Both those who are close to you and those who are not will unexpectedly admonish you as if they were your true friends, saying, 'If you believe in the priest Nichiren, you will surely be misled. You will also be in disfavor with your lord.' Then, because the plots that people devise are fearsome even to worthy persons, you will certainly abandon your faith in the Lotus Sutra" (WND-1, 800).

²¹ Bai Juyi (also Po Chü-I; 772–846): A poet and a government official who was one of the great writers of the Tang dynasty in China. He composed poems describing the sorrows of the people and censuring the abuses of officials, and at one time suffered banishment because of his forceful remonstrations to the emperor.

endeavor. Bai Juyi asks what the carp must be feeling, and provides an answer to the effect: “Apparently, if you become a dragon, you have the hard work of ascending into the heavens and making the rain fall. Rather than taking on such hardship, it’s probably better to remain a carp and swim about freely.”²² Having observed the vicissitudes of the political realm, Bai Juyi no doubt held the sentiment that one might be happier where one is now, living just as one pleases, rather than shouldering onerous responsibilities that often come with success.

Dragons have the job of making the rain fall—this same work can be regarded as a burden or as a mission, depending on how one looks at it. This difference in outlook or attitude is also what determines whether we will be defeated by negative influences, or evil friends, or successfully attain Buddhahood. Truly, as the Daishonin says, “It is the heart that is important” (WND-1, 1000). And this difference in heart or spirit comes down to whether or not we embrace the “great vow” that is mentioned in this letter.

To bring our practice of the Lotus Sutra, or the Mystic Law, to successful completion means that we must eagerly and joyfully embrace the mission of taking on the sufferings of still more and more people and of challenging even greater difficulties in our cause for human peace and happiness. The Daishonin urges us to actively seek this way of life, to valiantly climb the Dragon Gate of faith as successors of kosen-rufu, and attain Buddhahood without fail. As practitioners of the Mystic Law, this is what it means for us to “live based on a great vow.”

Until recently these events seemed to have had no bearing on us, but now we find ourselves facing the same kind of ordeal. My wish is that all my disciples make a great vow. We are very fortunate to be alive after the widespread epidemics that occurred last year and the year before. But now with the impending Mongol invasion it appears that few will survive. In the end, no one can escape death. The sufferings at that time will be exactly like what we are experiencing now. Since death is the same in either case, you should be willing to offer your life for the Lotus Sutra. Think of this offering as a drop of dew rejoining the ocean, or a speck of dust returning to the earth. A passage from the third volume of the Lotus Sutra reads, “We beg that the merit gained through these gifts may be spread far and wide to everyone, so that we and other living beings all together may attain the Buddha way” [LS7, 130].

²² Translated from the Japanese. Bai Juyi, *Haku Rakuten Zenshishu* (Collected Poems of Bai Juyi), translated and annotated by Misao Saku (Tokyo: Nihon Toshō Center, 1989), vol. 2, p. 691.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The sixth day of the eleventh month

Reply to Ueno the Worthy

I write this letter in deep gratitude for your dedication throughout the events at Atsuvara. (WND-1, 1003)

The Great Vow: Our Foundation in an Age of Confusion

The Daishonin writes: “Until recently these events seemed to have had no bearing on us, but now we find ourselves facing the same kind of ordeal” (WND-1, 1003). “These events” refers to how Shariputra and those who received the seeds of Buddhahood in the remote past regressed in their practice for an incredibly long period of time. The Daishonin is pointing out that his disciples at that present moment were facing a similar danger. Needless to say, he is alluding to the Atsuvara Persecution.

The only way to repel this fierce attack of the devil king is to base one’s life on “a great vow” (WND-1, 1003). We cannot bring forth the strength to withstand great hardships or persecution for the sake of the Lotus Sutra unless we make our ultimate goal the attainment of Buddhahood in this lifetime and dedicate our lives to the great vow of the Buddha for the realization of kosen-rufu. Therefore, the Daishonin calls out from the depths of his being: “My wish is that all my disciples make a great vow” (WND-1, 1003). A life based on a great vow is truly profound and unshakable.

Next, the Daishonin states: “No one can escape death” (WND-1, 1003). Epidemics had raged throughout the land during 1277 and 1278—the two years prior to that in which this letter was written. In an effort to halt these epidemics, the era name had been changed from Kenji to Koan (in 1278), but it had no effect.²³ In another writing, the Daishonin describes the terrible toll these epidemics had taken: “People die like trees toppling before a great wind or plants flattened by a severe snowfall” (WND-2, 802).

In addition, the people of Japan were assailed by the fear and anxiety that the Mongols might attempt another invasion. The first Mongol invasion had been in October 1274, five years before this letter was written. The second Mongol invasion happened in April 1281, two years after this writing. The ferocity of the first invasion left the entire populace filled with a sense of dread. They were terrified that Japan

²³ Era names were usually changed on the accession of a new emperor, or when some natural disaster of severe proportions occurred—the intention in the latter case being that a more auspicious name would change the fortunes of the particular era for the better.

might be utterly destroyed if it failed to ward off another attack.

The inexorable reality of death must have been deeply impressed on the minds of the people of the day. Therefore, the Daishonin writes: “In the end, no one can escape death. The sufferings at that time will be exactly like what we are experiencing now. Since death is the same in either case, you should be willing to offer your life for the Lotus Sutra” (WND-1, 1003).

The Atsuvara Persecution led to the execution of three of the Daishonin’s farmer disciples who are known as the “three martyrs of Atsuvara.”²⁴ There are two theories about when their execution happened. One states that it occurred on October 15, 1279, just before this letter was written (in November 1279). Another holds that it took place in April 1280, the following year. If we take the former view as being correct, then the words, “Since death is the same in either case, you should be willing to offer your life for the Lotus Sutra,” can be read as an indication that their deaths had profound significance in terms of Buddhism and as praise of their just and courageous struggles. Of course, it is not the Daishonin’s intention to glorify death. He is praising strong faith that does not waver even in the face of death.

Why, then, should there be no cause for regret in laying down one’s life for the Lotus Sutra? Regarding this, the Daishonin says: “Think of this offering as a drop of dew rejoining the ocean, or a speck of dust returning to the earth” (WND-1, 1003). From the standpoint of eternity, our present existence is as fleeting as dew. And, compared to the colossal scale of the universe, our lives are as tiny as specks of dust. However, by solidly basing our lives on the Mystic Law—which is as vast as the ocean and as firm as the earth—we can establish an unshakable and boundless state of life that is at one with that all-encompassing Law. This is the Daishonin’s message.

In another writing, he also states: “Like the dew merging with the great ocean or soil added to the great earth, [the benefit of this offering] will remain in lifetime after lifetime, and never abate for existence after existence” (WND-2, 532). Dew by merging with the ocean, and dust by returning to the earth, continue and live on eternally, in a manner of speaking. In the same way, our lives, as people dedicated to realizing kosen-rufu, will merge into the Buddhahood in the universe, and eternally repeat the cycle of birth and death in that indestructible realm. Moreover, we will always be reborn to fulfill the supreme mission of kosen-rufu in the place and circumstances of our choosing. In that sense, we can interpret the Daishonin’s call to “make a great vow” to mean “enter an eternal and unsurpassed way of being.”

Living for the Happiness of Oneself and Others

²⁴ The Atsuvara Persecution culminated with Hei no Saemon, the deputy chief of the Office of Military and Police Affairs, ordering the execution of three of the Daishonin’s followers—the brothers Jinshiro, Yagoro, and Yarokuro—who steadfastly refused to recant their faith. They are known as the “three martyrs of Atsuvara.”

In closing, the Daishonin writes: “A passage from the third volume of the Lotus Sutra reads, ‘We beg that the merit gained through these gifts may be spread far and wide to everyone, so that we and other living beings all together may attain the Buddha way’ [LS7, 130].” This passage is found in the “Parable of the Phantom City” (7th) chapter of the sutra, which is contained in the third volume. It appears in the section where the Brahma kings offer their palaces to the Buddha with the wish that the benefit arising from doing so will spread widely to many people, so that both they and others can attain the Buddha way.

As indicated by the phrase “all together,” it is important to wish for the happiness of all people as well as one’s own. This great vow to strive for and realize the happiness of ourselves and others—both in this lifetime and eternally throughout all future existences—is the essence of Mahayana Buddhism.

From our standpoint as practitioners of the Daishonin’s Buddhism, the great vow means dedicating our lives to kosen-rufu. A teacher or mentor sets forth and demonstrates this noble way of life, while genuine disciples emulate that example.

We have now entered an age when Bodhisattvas of the Earth awakened to the Daishonin’s Buddhism are standing up all over the world and striving for kosen-rufu with solid unity of purpose. Our movement constitutes an alliance of Bodhisattvas of the Earth who share the same great vow. The young people who will shoulder the second act of kosen-rufu have stood up in communities everywhere. I entrust everything to you! The future is in your hands!

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