

This month, we will study excerpts from President Ikeda's lecture on the gosho "The Dragon Gate" from SGI President Ikeda's Study Lecture Series LEARNING FROM THE GOSHO: THE HOPE-FILLED WRITINGS OF NICHIREN DAISHONIN

"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

[...] 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,¹ who was then a 21-year-old youth struggling to protect his fellow believers amid the intense pressures of the Atsuvara Persecution.²

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). [...]

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. [...] 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. [...]

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. [...]

¹ 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.

² 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.

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 Atsuahara Persecution. [...]

This letter was written at the very height of the Atsuahara 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. [...]

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 [...]. 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. [...] 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 impurities³ as described in the Lotus Sutra; while the birds of prey and fishermen can be likened to the three obstacles and four devils⁴ and the three powerful enemies⁵ that

³ 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.

⁴ 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.

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 desires⁶ and fundamental darkness.⁷ Shakyamuni compared these forces to a strong current or flood.⁸ 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).⁹

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 “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 [...]. 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

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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.]

⁹ 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 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).

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. [...] 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.

[...] We must never lose the fundamental spirit to strive for people's happiness and to open the way for the youth. [...]

Decline is brought about by arrogance, ingratitude, and bureaucratism. The only way to vanquish these obstacles is for disciples to make the mentor's heart their own and throw themselves into the challenge. [...]

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. 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 backslied 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.”¹⁰

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. [...]

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. [...]

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.¹¹ [...]

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. [...]

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

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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).

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 Great Vow: Our Foundation in an Age of Confusion

[...] 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. [...]

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.”¹² [...]

Of course, it is not the Daishonin’s intention to glorify death. He is praising strong faith that

¹² 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.”

does not waver even in the face of death. [...]

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 [...] 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. [...]

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 [...].

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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