

Excerpts Ikeda Sensei's Study Lecture Series - THE HERITAGE OF THE ULTIMATE LAW OF LIFE

This month we study excerpts from Ikeda Sensei's lecture series on one of Nichiren Daishonin's most important writings: The Heritage of Faith

The Heritage for Attaining Buddhahood Flows in the Lives of Disciples Who Strive Selflessly for Others' Happiness in the Same Spirit As the Mentor¹

Be resolved to summon forth the great power of faith, and chant Nam-myoho-rence-kyo with the prayer that your faith will be steadfast and correct at the moment of death. Never seek any other way to inherit the ultimate Law of life and death, and manifest it in your life. Only then will you realize that earthly desires are enlightenment, and that the sufferings of birth and death are nirvana. Even embracing the Lotus Sutra would be useless without the heritage of faith.[...]

Lecture

This writing, which constitutes Nichiren Daishonin's response to Sairen-bo's question about the transmission of the ultimate Law of life and death, clarifies that Myoho-rence-kyo is the supreme Law that can free all people of the sufferings of birth and death. Also, in addition to outlining on several different levels what it means to embrace and uphold this Law, this letter stresses to Sairen-bo the importance of taking as one's teacher the Daishonin—who functions as Bodhisattva Superior Practices² in the Latter Day of the Law—and practicing faith with the same spirit as he does, in order to overcome the sufferings of birth and death. The final passage then concludes by stating that the heritage of faith is the only true means by which all people can inherit the Law of Myoho-rence-kyo, the ultimate Law of life and death (cf. WND-1, 218).

This conclusion addresses the very heart of Buddhism. The question of life and death is a fundamental source of human suffering, and the transmission of the ultimate Law of life and death is a means for resolving that suffering. No matter how wonderful a teaching may seem, unless it explains to individuals the key to surmounting the sufferings of birth and death, it doesn't have any real substance.

The Heritage of Faith in All Its Aspects

The best and surest way to convey the supreme Law to others is through faith. The Law cannot be transmitted by such transitory and illusory phenomena as priestly authority or religious rituals and ceremonies.[...]To share in the heritage of the Law means to bring forth within us this boundless power of the Law. That is why in this writing the Daishonin has gone to great lengths to offer a full, multidimensional explanation of the heritage of faith, which we have discussed in detail over the course of this series. In this final installment, let us reconfirm the main points.

First is the aspect of correct faith grounded in the realization that "Shakyamuni Buddha who attained enlightenment countless kalpas ago,³ the Lotus Sutra that leads all people to

¹ SGI Newsletter 7359.

² Bodhisattva Superior Practices: Leader of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, disciples of Shakyamuni since the remote past. Shakyamuni entrusts these bodhisattvas with propagation of the Lotus Sutra after his passing.

³ This refers to the Buddha who eternally undergoes the cycle of birth and death in the realm of Buddhahood in order to teach and convert living beings in the saha world. In the "Life Span" (16th) chapter of the Lotus

Buddhahood,⁴ and we ordinary human beings are in no way different or separate from one another” (WND-1, 216). This is a crucial point concerning the substance of faith in the Mystic Law. In this writing, the Daishonin states that chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo with this belief is “a matter of utmost importance” for his disciples (WND-1, 216). The core message of this statement is to believe that our present self is an entity of Myoho-rence-kyo and that we can attain Buddhahood in our present form in this lifetime.

Second is the aspect of striving fully in faith so that we have no regrets, based on the spirit that “now is the last moment of one’s life” (WND-1, 216), and achieving “a correct and steadfast mind at the moment of death” (cf. WND-1, 218). Wholeheartedly practicing faith day after day and month after month, and continuing to do so throughout our life, assures us of attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime. Here, the Daishonin explains the heritage of faith in terms of the depth of one’s faith and continuing in one’s Buddhist practice.

Moreover, when we attain Buddhahood in this existence, our life and death throughout the cycle of rebirth over past, present, and future all become “life and death as functions of Myoho-rence-kyo,”⁵ and follow the rhythm of birth and death in the realm of Buddhahood.⁶ This present lifetime in which we have been born as human beings is an irreplaceable existence; it will determine the direction of our lives throughout the eternal cycle of birth and death.

Third is the importance of unity in faith, a commitment to the widespread propagation of the Law in the spirit of “many in body, but one in mind” (WND-1, 217). The heritage of Myoho-rence-kyo is not just there for ourselves. All people are entities of Myoho-rence-kyo, and as such can partake in the heritage for attaining Buddhahood. To accomplish this is kosen-rufu, the great wish or vow of the Buddha. And it is made a reality by the harmonious community of practitioners who are united in faith toward that shared objective. Here, the Daishonin clarifies the heritage of faith in terms of kosen-rufu and the harmonious community of practitioners. As I have summarized above, the Daishonin explains the meaning of the heritage of faith on different levels—1) the substance of faith, 2) the depth of faith and continuing in Buddhist practice, and 3) kosen-rufu and the harmonious community of practitioners. By doing so, he gives us a full picture of the kind of faith needed to share in the heritage of the ultimate Law of life and death.

Sharing the Same Commitment as the Teacher Is the Key

Sutra, Shakyamuni reveals that since attaining enlightenment in the far distant past of numberless major world system dust particle kalpas ago, his life has endured throughout and will continue likewise into the eternal future, being ultimately without beginning or end.

⁴ The Lotus Sutra as the teaching which reveals that all people inherently possess the Buddha nature, and which expounds the path whereby they can enter the Buddha way and attain enlightenment.

⁵ Life and death as functions of Myoho-rence-kyo: Life and death are originally inherent aspects of Myoho-rence-kyo, which is the fundamental Law pervading the universe and all life. Since Myoho-rence-kyo encompasses the Ten Worlds, all things, as entities of Myoho-rence-kyo, undergo the phases of life and death in the Ten Worlds. Accordingly, by embracing the Mystic Law, we can transform birth and death in the realm of delusion of the nine worlds into birth and death in the realm of Buddhahood.

⁶ Birth and death in the realm of Buddhahood: To freely undergo the cycle of birth and death based on the realization that our lives are entities of the all-pervasive Law of Myoho-rence-kyo and that life and death are inherent functions of Myoho-rence-kyo. Further, it is to embody the immense compassion and life-force inherent in the universe and practice the Buddha way in lifetime after lifetime in order to lead all living beings to enlightenment.

Furthermore, the Daishonin refers to the teacher who embodies all of these aspects of the heritage of faith. This is Bodhisattva Superior Practices. The multifaceted meaning of the heritage of faith has been explained in words, but if many people are to actually share in this heritage in their own lives, it is necessary to have a teacher who embodies it in its entirety. Whereas words explain each of the different aspects of the heritage of faith separately, a teacher whose character and actions embody the Law of Myoho-enge-kyo can convey and awaken people to this heritage at one stroke. Therefore, in this writing, the Daishonin urges us to chant and practice Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, the Law transmitted by Bodhisattva Superior Practices, and he implies that his own efforts in propagating this teaching correspond to the appearance of Superior Practices as predicted in the Lotus Sutra. After these remarks concerning the teacher, the Daishonin concludes by emphasizing the importance of the heritage of faith. In other words, striving in faith with the same commitment as the teacher is the key and the ultimate path to sharing in the heritage of faith. We can regard this entire writing as a detailed exposition of the heritage of faith.

The View of Life and Death of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism: A Wellspring of Hope for Humankind

Since my youth, I have been confident that a change in the way of looking at life and death, based on the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, would give untold hope to humankind. I have also felt that this would form an indispensable foundation for actualizing world peace. And I have discussed this in various ways whenever the opportunity has arisen. In my dialogue with British historian Arnold J. Toynbee (1889–1975) [published in English under the title *Choose Life*], the first of my many dialogues with scholars and leaders around the globe, we squarely took up and discussed this theme of life and death. "Does life persist after death, or does it belong only to this world? If it does continue beyond death, is it eternal or finite, and in what state does it persist?"⁷ Dr. Toynbee earnestly listened to the candid questions that I raised. And he offered the restrained comments of a scholar, responding: "The possible eternal nature of life is an important question that arouses points insusceptible of actual proof."⁸ But he also went on to say: "I believe that these questions can be answered in terms of Ku [the Buddhist concept of non-substantiality] or of eternity, but not in terms of space-time."⁹

He inferred that the question of life and death is a fundamental issue not so much of scholarship, but of religion, and turned the question back on me, suggesting that it would fall to me as a Buddhist to provide an answer. The insightful conclusion of this leading intellectual of the West is that the answer to this question lies in the domain of religion. In his work *The System of Value-Creating Education*,¹⁰ first Soka Gakkai president Tsunesaburo Makiguchi makes the following observation:

With reference to our life activities as they relate to the universe as a whole, when we directly confront the problem of life and death—even if we are a person of great wisdom or

⁷ Arnold Toynbee and Daisaku Ikeda, *Choose Life: A Dialogue*, edited by Richard L. Gage (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 272.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p. 281.

¹⁰ *The System of Value-Creating Education*: A work in which Soka Gakkai founding president Tsunesaburo Makiguchi set forth the practical educational methods that he developed and advocated. The first volume of the work was published on November 18, 1930, and marked official start of the Soka Gakkai.

scholarship, or a person of great heroism or enterprise—we realize how miniscule our own power is in comparison. At that time, we have to face up to the power of the universe itself, which is truly awesome in its immensity. Our activities on a religious or spiritual sphere arise from this recognition. Our life activities as they relate to society, too, can in fact be regarded as part of such activities.¹¹

He is saying that if we wish to resolve the problem of life and death, we must acknowledge the immense power of the universe and open up our lives to the spiritual or religious impulse within. His point that our activities in society are part of our spiritual or religious activities also bears close consideration.

As practitioners of the Daishonin's Buddhism, the powerful life-force that we develop through our activities in the spiritual realm serves as the engine that enables us to lead positive and valuable lives in society. Here, the heritage of faith is the key to a spiritual life in which we are in tune with the immense power of the universe that encompasses both life and death.

Abutsu-bo's Seeking Spirit toward the Daishonin

Here, based on guidance the Daishonin gave to his followers, I would like to highlight the decisive importance of the heritage of faith, especially the aspect of striving with the same commitment as the mentor, in overcoming the sufferings of birth and death.

Abutsu-bo¹² can be considered to be a leading representative of the followers who shared in the heritage of faith during the Daishonin's day, and thereby overcame the sufferings of birth and death and attained Buddhahood in his lifetime. In a letter to the lay nun Sennichi about her deceased husband, Abutsu-bo, the Daishonin writes:

Some may wonder where the spirit of the late Abutsu-bo may be at this moment. But by using the clear mirror of the Lotus Sutra to reflect his image, I, Nichiren, can see him among the assembly on Eagle Peak, seated within the treasure tower of Many Treasures Buddha and facing toward the east. (WND-1, 1042)

Here, the Daishonin describes Abutsu-bo as "facing toward the east," meaning he is seated directly opposite the two Buddhas Shakyamuni and Many Treasures who are seated side by side within the treasure tower at the pure land of Eagle Peak.¹³ This was no doubt the true image of Abutsu-bo, who while alive risked his own life to support and aid the Daishonin.[...] The deceased Abutsu-bo, we are told, now resides in the pure land of Eagle Peak and is facing the Buddhas inside the treasure tower with the same earnest spirit with which he sought out the Daishonin during his life. We can take this to mean that disciples are certain to attain Buddhahood if they strive in faith with a seeking spirit toward the teacher who expounds and practices the Mystic Law.

¹¹ Translated from Japanese. Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, *Soka Kyoikugaku Taikei* (The System of Value-Creating Education), in *Makiguchi Tsunesaburo Zenshu* (Collected Writings of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi) (Tokyo: Daisanbunmei-sha, 1982), vol. 5, p. 189.

¹² Abutsu-bo (d. 1279): A lay follower of Nichiren who lived in the province of Sado, an island in the Sea of Japan. When Nichiren was exiled to Sado in late 1271, Abutsu-bo converted to Nichiren's teachings together with his wife, Sennichi. The couple assisted Nichiren during his exile, supplying him with food and other necessities for more than two years until he was pardoned and left the island in 1274. After Nichiren went to live at Mount Minobu, Abutsu-bo made several journeys to visit him there.

¹³ Eagle Peak is the place where Shakyamuni preached the Lotus Sutra. It also symbolizes the Buddha land or the state of Buddhahood, as in the expression "the pure land of Eagle Peak."

Guidance to Nanjo Hyoe Shichiro

Next, I would like to cite a passage from “Encouragement to a Sick Person,” a letter the Daishonin wrote in 1264 to Nanjo Hyoe Shichiro,¹⁴ the father of Nanjo Tokimitsu¹⁵—both of whom embraced faith in the Mystic Law. Shichiro had fallen ill that year and passed away the following. This writing can be viewed as the Daishonin’s heartfelt guidance to a disciple who was approaching death, clarifying the essential path for attaining Buddhahood.[...] In this letter, the Daishonin teaches Shichiro the spirit and practice of the votary of the Lotus Sutra based on the five guides for propagation.¹⁶ As the Daishonin indicates when he says they represent “the attitude of mind that should characterize the votary of the Lotus Sutra when he strives to propagate its teachings” (WND-2, 246), these are five important points that practitioners must pay attention to when spreading the Mystic Law. Here, the Daishonin, the teacher of kosen-rufu, is in fact describing his own spirit and actions as the votary of the Lotus Sutra.

Through this letter, he is trying to explain to Shichiro, who has fallen ill and is facing death, the importance of striving in faith with the same spirit that he has. This points to how practicing faith with the same commitment as the teacher who is the votary of the Lotus Sutra can assist us enormously in overcoming the sufferings of birth and death and attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime.[...]

The Pride of Leading a Life of Unsurpassed Value

The path of mentor and disciple in the Soka Gakkai has also been characterized by a shared commitment and dedicated efforts to widely propagate Nichiren Buddhism in society. And I am confident that the valiant struggles of our members since the pioneering days of our movement are actions that carry on the humanistic legacy of the Lotus Sutra.

On the evening of August 14 (in 1947), I met President Toda at a discussion meeting in Kamata in Tokyo. My mentor was 47 at the time, and I was 19. When I entered the room on that fateful day, President Toda was giving a lecture on the Daishonin’s treatise “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land.” He declared: “I want to rid the world of all suffering and misery. Won’t you join me?” That was the first time I heard Mr. Toda speak. I believe his words were also a cry heralding the dawn of a great new people’s movement. On that day, I asked him what the true way of life for a human being was. President Toda’s response was entirely free of any intellectual game-playing or deceit. Each of his answers shone with genuine humanity. He was truly a person who was grounded in the Lotus Sutra and had risen above the sufferings of birth, aging, sickness, and death. That day marked the start of my journey of shared commitment with my mentor. Mr. Toda

¹⁴ Nanjo Hyoe Shichiro (d. 1265): A lay follower of Nichiren Daishonin and the father of Nanjo Tokimitsu. A retainer of the Kamakura shogunate, he governed Nanjo Village in Izu Province. As steward of the village, he was also called Ueno. Originally a believer in the Pure Land (Nembutsu) teaching, he became the Daishonin’s follower after hearing him preach. He is thought to have fallen ill near the end of 1264, and he passed away the following year.

¹⁵ Nanjo Tokimitsu (1259–1332): A lay follower of Nichiren Daishonin and the second son of Nanjo Hyoe Shichiro. In addition to supporting the Daishonin, Tokimitsu aided Nikko Shonin, the Daishonin’s direct disciple and subsequent successor, in his propagation efforts in the Fuji area. He also provided crucial assistance to fellow practitioners at the time of the Atsuhara Persecution (1278 onward).

¹⁶ Five criteria for propagating Buddhism: (1) the teaching, (2) the people’s capacity, (3) the time, (4) the country, and (5) the sequence of propagation.

taught me about the true nature of life and death. And as time went by, I began to feel it was my duty as a disciple to clarify and show actual proof of overcoming the sufferings of birth and death. [...]

I learned the way of faith in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, the key to absolute victory, from Mr. Toda. Mr. Toda learned it from Mr. Makiguchi. And Mr. Makiguchi learned it from the Daishonin and chanting to the Gohonzon. This is the heritage of mentor and disciple in the Soka Gakkai. When disciples unite in spirit with the mentor, they can overcome the sufferings of birth and death and, in this lifetime, attain a state in which they savor the boundless joy of the Law that continues eternally throughout the three existences. That is the purpose of Buddhism. Accordingly, the key to inheriting the ultimate Law of life and death lies in faith that embodies the spirit of not begrudging one's life in striving for kosen-rufu and the happiness of others, united in spirit with the mentor.[...]

The brilliant second act of worldwide kosen-rufu has now opened. An age when the heritage of the ultimate Law of life and death flows throughout the world has now arrived. We have only just begun. There is no more noble or valuable way of life than enabling people across the globe to share in this supreme heritage and to savor a state of being in which they can feel joy in both life and death. The world is waiting for the advance of Soka humanism, which has the power to elevate people's lives to a state pervaded by eternity, happiness, true self, and purity. The world is closely watching the victorious achievements of mentor and disciple in the SGI.