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LEARNING FROM THE WRITINGS OF NICHIREN DAISHONIN: THE TEACHINGS FOR VICTORY

[20] "The Proof of the Lotus Sutra"

The Prayers of a Votary of the Lotus Sutra to Overcome Illness

How does the mirror of the Lotus Sutra portray the people who, in the evil world of the latter age, believe in the teachings of the Lotus Sutra just as they are set forth in the sutra? Shakyamuni Buddha has left us words from his golden mouth revealing that such people have already made offerings to a hundred thousand million Buddhas in their past existences. . . .

[W]hen ordinary people in the latter age believe in even one or two words of the Lotus Sutra, they are embracing the teaching to which the Buddhas of the ten directions have given credence. I wonder what karma we created in the past to have been born as such persons, and I am filled with joy. The words of Shakyamuni that I referred to above indicate that the blessings that come from having made offerings to a hundred thousand million Buddhas are so great that, even if one has believed in teachings other than the Lotus Sutra and as a result of this slander been born poor and lowly, one is still able to believe in this sutra in this lifetime. A T'ien-t'ai [school's] commentary states, "It is like the case of a person who falls to the ground, but who then pushes himself up from the ground and rises to his feet again." One who has fallen to the ground recovers and rises up from the ground. Those who slander the Lotus Sutra will fall to the ground of the three evil paths, or of the human and heavenly realms, but in the end, through the help of the Lotus Sutra, they will attain Buddhahood.

Now since you, Ueno Shichiro Jiro [Nanjo Tokimitsu], are an ordinary person in the latter age and were born to a warrior family, you should by rights be called an evil man, and yet your heart is that of a good man. I say this for a reason. Everyone, from the ruler on down to the common people, refuses to take faith in my teachings. They inflict harm on the few who do embrace them, heavily taxing or confiscating

their estates and fields, or even in some cases putting them to death. So it is a difficult thing to believe in my teachings, and yet both your mother and your deceased father dared to accept them. Now you have succeeded your father as his heir, and without any prompting from others, you too have wholeheartedly embraced these teachings. Many people, both high and low, have admonished or threatened you, but you have refused to give up your faith. Since you now appear certain to attain Buddhahood, perhaps the heavenly devil and evil spirits are using illness to try to intimidate you. Life in this world is limited. Never be even the least bit afraid! . . .

And you demons, by making this man [Nanjo Tokimitsu] suffer, are you trying to swallow a sword point first, or embrace a raging fire, or become the archenemy of the Buddhas of the ten directions in the three existences? How terrible this will be for you! Should you not cure this man's illness immediately, act rather as his protectors, and escape from the grievous sufferings that are the lot of demons? If you fail to do so, will you not have your heads broken into seven pieces in this life and fall into the great hell of incessant suffering in your next life! Consider it deeply. Consider it. If you ignore my words, you will certainly regret it later. (WND-1, 1108–09)

Lecture

Good health is the wish of all people. Long life is the desire of all humankind. From the time I became Soka Gakkai president (in 1960), I have chanted earnestly each day for the health and longevity, the safety and well-being, of all our members. For five decades, I have prayed fervently that all Buddhas and bodhisattvas, all heavenly deities—the positive forces throughout the universe—would rigorously protect and safeguard my disciples without fail.

The daimoku of Nam-myoho-rence-kyo is the great beneficial medicine for good health and long life; it is the fundamental rhythm of the universe and the wellspring of the immense life-force of Buddhas. My sincerest wish, therefore, is that all who possess this wonderful medicine of the Mystic Law will lead supremely rewarding and deeply satisfying lives of mission, living out their lives to the fullest. Faith in the Mystic Law makes this possible.¹

In this installment, with my sincere prayers for the happiness and safety of all our members, I would like to discuss the writing “The Proof of the Lotus Sutra,” a letter

¹ A passage in the “Life Span” (16th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra reads: “We beg you to cure us and let us live out our lives!” (LSOC16, 269 [LS16, 228]). It appears in the parable of the outstanding physician, who imparts “good medicine” (a metaphor for Myoho-rence-kyo) to his children who have “drunk poison” (succumbed to delusion) and implore him to cure their illness. This passage sets forth the principle of prolonging one's life through faith in the Mystic Law.

into which Nichiren Daishonin pours his whole life to encourage a beloved disciple battling a life-threatening illness.

This letter is dated February 28, 1282. The Daishonin himself had been suffering from ill health since the previous year. News had recently reached him that Nanjo Tokimitsu²—who had been fighting valiantly under the leadership of Nikko Shonin against religious persecution in Suruga Province (present-day central Shizuoka Prefecture)—had fallen seriously ill. Tokimitsu was only in his early 20s at the time.

Three days before writing this letter, the Daishonin had dictated a note conveying his prayers for Tokimitsu's speedy recovery, which had been transcribed and dispatched by Nichiro, a principal disciple. But it appears that he could not stem his concern for his beloved young follower and finally took up his brush to write him a personal letter of earnest encouragement. In this letter, he teaches Tokimitsu the essence of faith for overcoming illness, seeking to awaken in his young life the fighting spirit not to be defeated by the devil of illness. This illustrates the incredible care and compassion of the Daishonin.

One rather unusual feature of this writing is that the Daishonin signs his name at the beginning rather than at the end. We find the words, “Nichiren, the votary of the Lotus Sutra” (WND-1, 1108), appearing at the start. This is the only one of the Daishonin's extant writings where this is the case.

A votary of the Lotus Sutra is someone who works to establish the supreme teaching for the enlightenment of all people in the evil age of the Latter Day and selflessly propagates that teaching for the sake of worldwide kosen-rufu into the eternal future. In “The Proof of the Lotus Sutra,” the Daishonin offers strict yet compassionate guidance as a votary of the Lotus Sutra to a young follower who will carry on the mission of propagating the Mystic Law. He urges Tokimitsu to battle and resolutely triumph over the devil of illness so that he may bring forth the victorious life-state of Buddhahood for all to see.

In addition, the Daishonin directly addresses the so-called demons, or negative workings in life. He sternly admonishes them for inflicting suffering on the disciple of a votary of the Lotus Sutra, warning that in doing so they risk making enemies of all the Buddhas throughout the ten directions and three existences. His words deeply and powerfully convey his towering spirit and conviction as a votary who has triumphed over great obstacles in his efforts to widely propagate the Mystic Law in the Latter Day.

At the end of the writing, we find the words: “Delivered by Hoki-bo” (WND-1, 1109). This indicates that the letter was first sent to Hoki-bo—otherwise known as Nikko Shonin. We can well imagine the Daishonin's trusted disciple going to see the ailing Tokimitsu with this heartfelt letter of encouragement and reading it to him at his bedside. Most certainly the ardent lion's roar of the Daishonin contained therein penetrated his young follower's life and made him deepen his resolve not to be

² 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).

defeated by the negative functions that were assailing him. And in fact, Tokimitsu overcame his illness and lived for another 50 years.

When the disciple strives with the same spirit as the mentor, there is no obstacle or devilish function that cannot be surmounted, and there is no illness that cannot be positively transformed in accord with the principle of “changing poison into medicine.”³ “The Proof of the Lotus Sutra” is a writing of the victory of mentor and disciple—a writing that highlights the key to good health and long life.

How does the mirror of the Lotus Sutra portray the people who, in the evil world of the latter age, believe in the teachings of the Lotus Sutra just as they are set forth in the sutra? Shakyamuni Buddha has left us words from his golden mouth revealing that such people have already made offerings to a hundred thousand million Buddhas in their past existences.⁴

[W]hen ordinary people in the latter age believe in even one or two words of the Lotus Sutra, they are embracing the teaching to which the Buddhas of the ten directions have given credence. I wonder what karma we created in the past to have been born as such persons, and I am filled with joy. The words of Shakyamuni that I referred to above indicate that the blessings that come from having made offerings to a hundred thousand million Buddhas are so great that, even if one has believed in teachings other than the Lotus Sutra and as a result of this slander been born poor and lowly, one is still able to believe in this

³ Changing poison into medicine: The principle that earthly desires and suffering can be transformed into benefit and enlightenment by virtue of the power of the Law. This phrase is found in a passage from Nagarjuna’s *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, which mentions “a great physician who can change poison into medicine.” In this passage, Nagarjuna compares the Lotus Sutra to a “great physician” because the sutra opens the possibility of attaining Buddhahood to persons of the two vehicles—voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones—who in other teachings were condemned as having scorched the seeds of Buddhahood. The Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai says in *Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*: “That persons of the two vehicles were given the prophecy of their enlightenment in this [Lotus] sutra means that it can change poison into medicine.” This phrase is often cited to show that any problem or suffering can be transformed eventually into the greatest happiness and fulfillment in life.

⁴ This is mentioned in the “Teacher of the Law” (10th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra. The passage reads: “These people have already offered alms to a hundred thousand million Buddhas and in the place of the Buddhas have fulfilled their great vow, and because they take pity on living beings they have been born in this human world” (LSOC10, 200 [LS10, 161]).

sutra in this lifetime. A T'ien-t'ai [school's] commentary states, "It is like the case of a person who falls to the ground, but who then pushes himself up from the ground and rises to his feet again."⁵ One who has fallen to the ground recovers and rises up from the ground. Those who slander the Lotus Sutra will fall to the ground of the three evil paths [i.e., the worlds of hell, hungry spirits, and animals], or of the human and heavenly realms, but in the end, through the help of the Lotus Sutra, they will attain Buddhahood. (WND-1, 1108)

Possessing a Profound Connection with the Lotus Sutra

In the first half of this writing, the Daishonin explains that those who believe in the Lotus Sutra in the Latter Day have an extremely profound karmic connection with Buddhism reaching back to previous existences. First, he emphasizes that they are people who have made offerings to "a hundred thousand million Buddhas" in the past. Not only does Shakyamuni Buddha tell us this, but Many Treasures Buddha and all the Buddhas of the ten directions also affirm it (cf. WND-1, 1108).

We are able to uphold the Lotus Sutra—the teaching of the highest truth—in the Latter Day because our lives are endowed with great good fortune and benefit beyond imagination. This is a truth to which Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and the Buddhas of the ten directions unanimously attest.

This prompts the Daishonin to observe: "I wonder what karma we created in the past to have been born as such persons, and I am filled with joy" (WND-1, 1108). It is through immense good fortune and an extraordinary karmic connection that we are able to uphold the Lotus Sutra in the Latter Day, an age steeped in suffering and confusion. The Daishonin teaches that if we practice the Lotus Sutra with this conviction, we will definitely be able to overcome any hardship and attain the life-state of absolute happiness that is Buddhahood.

Why is it, then, that those whose lives are endowed with vast good fortune and benefit gained from having made offerings to countless Buddhas should be born into an evil age and experience sufferings and hardships? This, the Daishonin explains, is because of their slander of the Lotus Sutra in past existences. However, their immense good fortune and benefit of making offerings to untold Buddhas, he says, still makes it possible for them—through their reverse relationship with the Lotus Sutra—to be born in this world as people who believe in the Lotus Sutra and with the potential to attain enlightenment through this sutra in this lifetime.

This is illustrated by a passage in Miao-lo's *Annotations on "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra"*: "It is like the case of a person who falls to the ground,

⁵ Miao-lo's *Annotations on "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra."*

but who then pushes himself up from the ground and rises to his feet again”⁶ (WND-1, 1108). This passage offers a metaphor for people who, though falling into evil paths as a result of slander, form a connection with the correct teaching that will ultimately enable them to find their way to enlightenment through that teaching.

Those who fall to the ground will get back on their feet by using the ground to push themselves up. In the same way, those who slander the Lotus Sutra will gain enlightenment through the Lotus Sutra. The Mystic Law embraces even those who form a reverse relationship with it, enabling all people to attain Buddhahood. Such is the unfathomable power of the “poison-drum relationship”⁷ in Buddhism.

Seeing Illness as an Opportunity to Deepen One’s Faith

Those who uphold the Mystic Law have the power to withstand any adversity. The daimoku of the Lotus Sutra—Nam-myoho-renge-kyo—has the beneficial power to lessen karmic retribution and change poison into medicine.

Here, let us look at some of the encouragement and guidance that the Daishonin sent to other followers who were struggling with illness.

In “On Curing Karmic Disease,” which is addressed to the lay priest Ota, he writes that even illnesses that result from karma and are the most difficult to cure can be healed by the good medicine of the Lotus Sutra, Myoho-renge-kyo (cf. WND-1, 632). And he cites a passage from the Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai’s *Great Concentration and Insight* that explains: “Even if one has committed grave offenses . . . the retribution can be lessened in this life. Thus, illness occurs when evil karma is about to be dissipated” (WND-1, 631). This expresses the principle of “lessening karmic retribution.”⁸

⁶ The longer quote reads: “It is like the case of a person who falls to the ground, but who then pushes himself up from the ground and rises to his feet again. Thus, even though one may slander the correct teaching, one will eventually be saved [by it] from the evil paths” (cf. WND-1, 632).

⁷ Poison-drum relationship: A reverse relationship, or a relationship formed through rejection. A bond formed with the Lotus Sutra by opposing or slandering it. One who opposes the Lotus Sutra when it is preached will still form a relationship with it by virtue of opposition, and will thereby attain Buddhahood eventually. A “poison drum” is a mythical drum daubed with poison; this is a reference to a statement in the Nirvana Sutra that once the poison drum is beaten, all those who hear it will die, even if they are not of the mind to listen to it. Similarly, when the correct teaching is preached, both those who embrace it and those who oppose it will equally receive the seeds of Buddhahood, and even those who oppose it will attain Buddhahood eventually. In this analogy, the “death” that results from hearing the correct teaching is the death of illusion or earthly desires. This metaphor is used to illustrate the benefit of even a reverse relationship with Buddhism.

⁸ Lessening karmic retribution: This term, which literally means, “transforming the heavy and receiving it lightly,” appears in the Nirvana Sutra. “Heavy” indicates negative karma accumulated over countless lifetimes in the past. As a benefit of protecting the correct teaching of Buddhism, we can experience relatively light karmic retribution in this lifetime, thereby expiating heavy karma that ordinarily would adversely affect us not only in this lifetime, but over many lifetimes to come.

The Daishonin explains that Ota is most surely experiencing his present illness so that he can avoid worse suffering that would appear as retribution for his past slander of the Law. He also assures him that he will definitely be healed and his life span extended (cf. WND-1, 634). The Daishonin even goes so far as to say that should there fail to be signs of recovery, Ota should cry out: “The Buddha, the eye of the entire world, is a great liar, and the Lotus, the wonderful sutra of the single vehicle, is a scripture of clever flourishes. [If this is not the case, then] the World-Honored One [Shakyamuni Buddha] should give me proof if he cares about his good name” (WND-1, 634). In these words of encouragement, the Daishonin is voicing his wholehearted wish that Ota regain his health.

Elsewhere, the Daishonin assures the lay nun Toki (Toki Jonin’s wife), who was suffering from a protracted illness, that because Buddhism has the power to change even fixed karma,⁹ it was definitely possible for her to extend her life. He tells her: “Sincere repentance will eradicate even fixed karma, to say nothing of karma that is unfixed” (WND-1, 954); and “You can rely on the power of the Lotus Sutra to cure even illness that is due to karma” (cf. WND-1, 656).

Being gravely ill doesn’t necessarily mean that one will die. The Daishonin writes to the lay nun Myoshin, the wife of the ailing lay priest Takahashi: “A person’s death is not determined by illness” (WND-1, 937). He continues: “Could not this illness of your husband’s be the Buddha’s design, because the Vimalakirti and Nirvana sutras both teach that sick people will surely attain Buddhahood? Illness gives rise to the resolve to attain the way” (WND-1, 937). If, as a result of falling ill, one deepens one’s determination in faith, then the path to Buddhahood will definitely open. Illness then becomes “the Buddha’s design.”

No doubt the Daishonin also wished to convey this powerful conviction to Tokimitsu. In “The Proof of the Lotus Sutra,” he writes in a similar vein: “In the end, through the help of the Lotus Sutra, they will attain Buddhahood” (WND-1, 1108). The Daishonin is urging Tokimitsu to have absolute confidence that he will gain the life-state of Buddhahood.

Now since you, Ueno Shichiro Jiro [Nanjo Tokimitsu], are an ordinary person in the latter age and were born to a warrior family, you should

⁹ Fixed karma: Also, immutable karma. The opposite of unfixed karma. Karma that inevitably produces a fixed or set result, whether negative or positive. Fixed karma may also be interpreted as karma whose effects are destined to appear at a fixed time. It was held that one’s life span was fixed as retribution for karma.

by rights be called an evil man,¹⁰ and yet your heart is that of a good man. I say this for a reason. Everyone, from the ruler on down to the common people, refuses to take faith in my teachings. They inflict harm on the few who do embrace them, heavily taxing or confiscating their estates and fields, or even in some cases putting them to death. So it is a difficult thing to believe in my teachings, and yet both your mother and your deceased father dared to accept them. Now you have succeeded your father as his heir, and without any prompting from others, you too have wholeheartedly embraced these teachings. Many people, both high and low, have admonished or threatened you, but you have refused to give up your faith. Since you now appear certain to attain Buddhahood, perhaps the heavenly devil [the devil king of the sixth heaven]¹¹ and evil spirits¹² are using illness to try to intimidate you. Life in this world is limited. Never be even the least bit afraid! (WND-1, 1108–09)

Being Determined to Battle the Three Obstacles and Four Devils

Here, the Daishonin broadens the scope of his discussion from illness to life's various hardships and sufferings in general. He emphasizes that it is by fearlessly confronting and overcoming such challenges that we can establish a life of unshakable victory. He also goes on to explain that the difficulties or trials that arise in our lives when we are earnestly persevering in our Buddhist practice are the workings of the three obstacles and four devils¹³ that seek to prevent us from attaining Buddhahood.

First of all, the Daishonin affirms how difficult it is to remain steadfast in faith in the evil age of the Latter Day. He specifically refers to the struggles faced by Tokimitsu's family, deeply commending the young man's parents on their strong faith.

¹⁰ The Daishonin says this because the work of a warrior involves killing.

¹¹ Heavenly devil: Also, devil king of the sixth heaven. 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. The devil king is a personification of the negative tendency to force others to one's will at any cost.

¹² The word for "evil spirits" in the original Japanese passage is *gedo*, which literally means "out of the way" and usually indicates heretics and non-Buddhists. Here, the word means something or someone that brings about disasters. Hence the expression "evil spirits."

¹³ 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 earthly desires, (2) the hindrance of the five components, (3) the hindrance of death, and (4) the hindrance of the devil king.

He also praises Tokimitsu, as his father's heir, for his staunch commitment to faith amid great adversity.

Tokimitsu's circumstances had been far from easy or tranquil. In Suruga Province, where the Atsuhara Persecution¹⁴ took place, Tokimitsu had striven tirelessly to protect his fellow practitioners and applied himself with unflagging devotion to his Buddhist practice. It must have seemed like the negative forces were intensifying their efforts to make Tokimitsu, a key figure among the Daishonin's followers in the area, abandon his faith. The Daishonin writes: "Many people, both high and low, have admonished or threatened you" (WND-1, 1109).

What makes Tokimitsu so admirable is that despite all the obstacles he faced, he continued to exert himself bravely and vigorously for the sake of the Law, refusing to discard his faith. Praising his sincere faith, the Daishonin declares that Tokimitsu must be close to attaining Buddhahood. He explains that this is undoubtedly the reason why illness is now assailing him. In other words, he declares that devilish functions are seeking to intimidate Tokimitsu in the form of illness and prevent him from moving forward—it is a trial in which Tokimitsu's faith will be put to the real test.

Allow me to clarify here that falling ill is not a sign of weak faith or defeat. No one can escape the four universal sufferings of birth, aging, sickness, and death. If, when we fall ill, we summon up powerful faith to battle the devil of illness, our illness itself can become an opportunity for us to achieve a life imbued with eternity, happiness, true self, and purity—the four noble virtues of the Buddha. It can serve as a chance for us to strengthen our faith even more so that we can triumph over devilish functions. And when we have the strong, invincible faith to withstand any onslaught of the three obstacles and four devils, nothing will be able to stop us from attaining the life-state of Buddhahood.

The three obstacles and four devils descend in force when an ordinary person is close to attaining Buddhahood. The Daishonin notes that when these obstructing forces appear, "the wise will rejoice while the foolish will retreat" (WND-1, 637). Do we have the faith of the wise, our hearts filled with a dauntless fighting spirit, or the faith of the foolish, our minds filled with alarm and doubt?

In the case of sickness, having the spirit to fight through to the end against the devil of illness is vital. Are we determined to win over the devil of illness or allow ourselves to be defeated by it? When we encounter illness or other painful suffering, we stand at a crossroads of great spiritual growth and inner development.

¹⁴ Atsuhara Persecution: A series of threats and acts of violence against followers of Nichiren Daishonin in Atsuhara Village, in Fuji District of Suruga Province, starting around in 1275 and continuing until around 1283. In 1279, 20 farmers, all believers, were arrested on false charges. They were interrogated by Hei no Saemon, the deputy chief of the Office of Military and Police Affairs, who demanded that they renounce their faith. However, not one of them yielded. Hei no Saemon eventually had three of them executed. Nanjo Tokimitsu used his influence to protect other believers during this time, sheltering some in his home. The Daishonin honored him for his courage and tireless efforts by calling him "Ueno the Worthy."

Founding Soka Gakkai president Tsunesaburo Makiguchi said:

To live one's life based on the Mystic Law is to "change poison into medicine." As long as we live in human society, there will be times when we encounter accidents or natural disasters, or experience setbacks such as business failures. Such painful and unfortunate events could be described as "poison" or "karmic retribution." No matter what situation we may face, however, if we base our lives on faith, on the Mystic Law, and exert ourselves in our Buddhist practice without doubting the power of the Gohonzon, we can definitely turn poison into medicine—transforming a negative situation into something positive.

For example, if you fall ill and just spend your time worrying that your illness is karmic retribution, it won't solve anything. The important thing is to persevere in faith with the strong conviction and determination to positively transform your illness, changing poison into medicine, and achieve the great good fortune and benefit of regaining your health. When you do so, not only will you overcome your illness but, when you make a complete recovery, you will be even healthier than you were before. This is the power of the Mystic Law, which can change poison into medicine.¹⁵

Crucial is the absolute confidence that you can change poison into medicine, no matter what daunting obstacles you may face. This unshakable belief is the key to overcoming not only illness but all kinds of difficulties in life, and to opening wide the path to attaining Buddhahood without fail. In *The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings*, the Daishonin clarifies this, saying: "The single word 'belief' is the sharp sword with which one confronts and overcomes fundamental darkness or ignorance" (OTT, 119–20).

In "The Proof of the Lotus Sutra," the Daishonin's stance on illness is very clear. He says: "Life in this world is limited. Never be even the least bit afraid!" (WND-1, 1109). This is his essential guidance to Tokimitsu.

Making Our Limited Life in This World One of Victory

Our life in this world is limited. Death comes to all of us one day. As the Daishonin says: "No one can escape death" (WND-1, 1003). That is why he urges Tokimitsu to devote his life unhesitatingly to the Lotus Sutra (cf. WND-1, 1003).¹⁶

There is nothing to fear when one has made the decision to dedicate one's limited life span in this world to widely propagating the Mystic Law and establishing the correct teaching for the peace of the land. There is nothing to fear when one is

¹⁵ Translated from Japanese. Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, *Makiguchi Tsunesaburo Shingenshu* (Selected Quotes of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi), edited by Takehisa Tsuji (Tokyo: Daisanbunmeisha, 1979), pp. 196–97.

¹⁶ The Daishonin writes: "Since death is the same in either case, you should be willing to offer your life for the Lotus Sutra" (WND-1, 1003).

determined to raise high the banner of supreme victory and glory and achieve happiness that will endure throughout the three existences.

Again, in a letter to the lay nun Toki, the Daishonin writes: “Take care of yourself, and do not burden your mind with grief” (WND-1, 656). Because we are human, a serious or protracted illness may drain our strength or spirit, causing us, without realizing it, to lament our situation or succumb to feelings of powerlessness or doubt. But no matter what ails us, we should live with the resolve not to give in to grief or sorrow. Especially, in terms of faith, we should rouse a powerful spirit to battle the devil of illness and not be defeated by our sickness. The key to this is chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo—the daimoku of the Mystic Law—of which the Daishonin declares: “Only the ship of Myoho-rence-kyo enables one to cross the sea of the sufferings of birth and death” (WND-1, 33). The beneficial power of chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo even once is boundless and immeasurable. All that matters is that we keep moving forward in our hearts each day, even if only a fraction of an inch. All that matters is that we are taking a step forward in our lives by continuing to “strengthen our faith day by day and month after month” (cf. WND-1, 997), as the Daishonin urges. Even if things don’t always progress the way we’d hoped, we should remember that many fellow members are also chanting for us to get well. There is no greater source of strength and support than this.

When we steadfastly battle the devil of illness based on faith, our illness in its entirety becomes an opportunity to transform our karma through the beneficial power of the Mystic Law to change poison into medicine. As the Daishonin confidently declares: “There is nothing to lament when we consider that we will surely become Buddhas” (WND-1, 657). He is describing a state of absolute assurance, of absolute peace of mind.

The Noble Value of Life as a Human Being

We practice the Daishonin’s Buddhism so that we can live out our lives to the fullest. The benefit of living even one day longer with faith in the Mystic Law is unfathomable. If we live even one day longer, we can spread the teachings of Buddhism that much more. This endows our lives with immeasurable good fortune and benefit. Those who battle the devil of illness based on faith through their example teach others of the noble value of life as a human being. As practitioners of the Daishonin’s Buddhism, no matter what our circumstances, we are able to bring forth wisdom and compassion through faith and make our own lives and those of others shine brightly. This is the way we of the SGI live our lives.

That is why using our wisdom to stay fit and healthy is also important. Faith means having both the wisdom to prevent illness and to deal with illness appropriately should it arise so that we can continue creating value with our lives. For instance, when we have overcome a serious illness or are still in the early stages of recovery, we should take care not to overexert ourselves. This is also vital wisdom for regaining our health. When we fall ill, we shouldn’t be impatient or forget to be careful. When we

need to rest, we should listen to our bodies and not overdo things. Once we have fully regained our health, we can devote ourselves to Gakkai activities again as energetically as we like.

Learning that his disciple Sairen-bo wished to seclude himself in the mountains because of ill health, the Daishonin responds by telling him to concentrate on treating his illness and to then return to making tireless efforts to propagate the Mystic Law when he has recovered (cf. WND-2, 460).¹⁷

We cannot defeat the devil of illness with a weak resolve. If we forget the fighting spirit to struggle for kosen-rufu in the same spirit as our mentor in faith, “devils will take advantage” (WND-1, 997).

Using faith to battle illness has become firmly established in the Soka Gakkai through the real-life struggles and actual proof of countless members. There are innumerable heroic individuals who have demonstrated the beneficial power of faith to change poison into medicine, inspiring those around them with their positive spirit and refusal to be defeated by the devil of illness.

Experiences in faith of battling illness and enacting a joyful drama of victory, supported by the sincere daimoku of family and fellow members, are themselves a great testimony to the power of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism.

And you demons, by making this man [Nanjo Tokimitsu] suffer, are you trying to swallow a sword point first, or embrace a raging fire, or become the archenemy of the Buddhas of the ten directions in the three existences? How terrible this will be for you! Should you not cure this man’s illness immediately, act rather as his protectors, and escape from the grievous sufferings that are the lot of demons? If you fail to do so, will you not have your heads broken into seven pieces¹⁸ in this life and fall into the great hell of incessant suffering in your next life! Consider it deeply. Consider it. If you ignore my words, you will certainly regret it later. (WND-1, 1109)

¹⁷ The Daishonin writes to Sairen-bo: “You speak of your desire to retire to the mountains. . . . But if you should for a time retire to a dwelling in the mountain valleys, once your illness is mended and conditions are favorable again, you should set aside thoughts of personal well-being and devote yourself to the propagation of the teachings” (WND-2, 460).

¹⁸ Heads broken into seven pieces: This is punishment befalling those who slander the votary of the Lotus Sutra. In the “Dharani” (26th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra, the ten demon daughters, in vowing to protect those who uphold the Lotus Sutra, state: “If there are those who fail to heed our spells / and trouble and disrupt the preachers of the Law, / their heads will split into seven pieces / like the branches of the arjaka tree” (LSOC26, 351 [LS26, 310]).

A Towering State of Absolute Confidence

“And you demons!” cries the Daishonin in this passage, which constitutes an angry rebuke of the devilish functions bent on taking away the life of his young disciple. As I mentioned earlier, it also constitutes a refutation by the Daishonin in his capacity as a votary of the Lotus Sutra, in which he seeks to denounce error and clarify the truth. He warns that inflicting suffering on Tokimitsu, a disciple of the votary of the Lotus Sutra, is to alienate all the Buddhas throughout the ten directions and three existences.

Here, “demons” refers to the negative functions that seek to weaken people and rob them of their lives. Viewed from the perspective of traditional Buddhist cosmology, there are evil demons that trouble and vex the practitioners of Buddhism, and benevolent demons that protect and safeguard Buddhism. In this passage, the Daishonin demands the evil demons to immediately cure Tokimitsu’s illness and become benevolent demons that will protect him instead of harming him.

“Should you not . . . escape from the grievous sufferings that are the lot of demons?” (WND-1, 1109), he asks. Demons represent beings that have fallen into the world of hungry spirits, a state that is filled with great suffering. Only the Lotus Sutra can free them from this realm of suffering. He urges the evil demons tormenting Tokimitsu to escape from their suffering by protecting this practitioner of the Lotus Sutra. Otherwise, he says, they will “have their heads broken into seven pieces in this life and fall into the great hell of incessant suffering in their next life” (cf. WND-1, 1109). In this way, the Daishonin sternly chastises the demons. He no doubt wished to show Tokimitsu his fearless conviction as a votary of the Lotus Sutra.

In light of this, let each of us, too, further strengthen our prayers as a votary of the Lotus Sutra, ready to courageously challenge the devil of illness head-on should it appear. Let us forge ahead with a firm resolve to turn even negative functions into positive influences that will support and assist us in our lives of great mission.

It is therefore important to chant daimoku, which is like the roar of a lion. The Daishonin writes:

Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is like the roar of a lion. What sickness can therefore be an obstacle? It is written that those who embrace the daimoku of the Lotus Sutra will be protected by the Mother of Demon Children¹⁹ and by the ten demon daughters.²⁰ (WND-1, 412)

¹⁹ Mother of Demon Children: A demoness said to have been a daughter of a yaksha demoness in Rajagriha. She is said to have fed the babies of others to her own children. In the “Dharani” (26th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra, however, she pledges before the Buddha to safeguard the votaries of the Lotus Sutra.

²⁰ Ten demon daughters: The ten female protective deities who appear in the “Dharani” (26th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra as the “daughters of rakshasa demons” or the “ten rakshasa daughters.” They vow to the Buddha to guard and protect the sutra’s votaries, saying that they will inflict punishment on any who trouble these votaries.

When faced with sickness, we need to summon the heart of a lion king from within us and fearlessly take on the devil of illness. This kind of courageous faith is vital.

The Daishonin also challenged his own illness with the heart of a lion king. At the time of writing “The Proof of the Lotus Sutra,” he was suffering from prolonged ill health. In another letter written the previous year (1281), he says: “My body is worn out and my spirit suffers from the daily debates, monthly persecutions, and two exiles. That is why for the last seven or eight years illnesses of aging have assailed me yearly, though none has led to a crisis” (WND-2, 949).

But no matter what his circumstances, the Daishonin continued to offer encouragement to his followers and carry on his tireless struggle to propagate the correct teaching. We see a clear instance of this in this letter, “The Proof of the Lotus Sutra,” which the Daishonin wrote despite debilitating illness for the sake of a youth to whom he wished to entrust the future.

In another letter toward the end of his life, expressing his appreciation for a disciple’s visit and sincere offerings that had benefited his health, the Daishonin writes exuberantly that he felt as though he were fit enough to catch a tiger or even ride a lion (cf. WND-2, 991).²¹

To encourage his followers, the Daishonin gave vivid accounts of how he successfully repulsed the attacks of the three obstacles and four devils. In doing so, he left behind an inspiring example of a life undefeated by the innate sufferings of birth, aging, sickness, and death.

Life Itself Is a Joy

Mr. Makiguchi asserted: “The main requirement for happiness is good health. And to enjoy good health, we must put Gakkai activities first.” Good health means having a challenging spirit. There was no better way to stay fit and healthy, Mr. Makiguchi taught, than by actively exerting ourselves in Gakkai activities for the sake of *kosen-rufu*.

At the same time, Mr. Makiguchi always warmly embraced those who were struggling with illness. In 1942, during World War II, he traveled all the way to the home of a family of members living in the village of Shimotsuma in Ibaraki Prefecture to offer encouragement to their sick seven-year-old child. This was the year before he was imprisoned for his beliefs by the Japanese militarist authorities.

My mentor, second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda, gave the following encouragement:

As a result of embracing the Gohonzon, even those who are worried or anxious about illness or other problems will be able to gain complete peace of mind. As

²¹ The Daishonin writes: “Your visit . . . was a great comfort to me. The illness that had made me so thin seemed to go away and I felt fit enough to go tiger hunting. And thanks to your gift of wakame [edible seaweed], I think I could even ride a lion” (WND-2, 991).

they come to savor a deep inner confidence and assurance, life itself will be a source of joy.

Nevertheless, because we are living beings of the nine worlds, we will still encounter problems at times. We may also find that the nature of our problems may change. For instance, whereas before we were preoccupied with our own concerns, we are able to turn our attention to the problems and sufferings of others instead. Don't you think that finding life itself an absolute joy is what it means to be a Buddha?

He also said:

Outwardly at times we might look like a "Bodhisattva Poverty" or "Bodhisattva Sickness," but that is merely a role we're playing in the drama of life. We are in fact bona fide Bodhisattvas of the Earth! Since life is a grand drama, we should thoroughly enjoy playing the role we have undertaken and demonstrate the greatness of the Mystic Law. . . .

The sharp sword that sets us free from a life shackled in such suffering [as illness or financial hardship] is the Mystic Law. Freeing all people throughout the land from such shackles is the mission and spirit of the Soka Gakkai.

What is true health? It is not simply the absence of illness. It comes down to whether we vibrantly continue our endeavors to create value based on faith. Those who transform the karma of illness into mission and constantly strive for self-renewal have already triumphed over the devil of illness. True health in both body and mind is found in the midst of struggle. This is the teaching of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

In another letter to the ailing lay priest Ota, the Daishonin writes: "On the one hand, knowing that you are in agony [because of your illness] grieves me, but on the other, I am delighted" (WND-1, 631). He says this because, viewed from the perspective of Buddhism, illness serves as a means for us to deepen our faith, while also indicating that we are on the path to attaining Buddhahood. In this respect, illness can be viewed as fortuitous.

The fact that struggling against illness can enrich and deepen a person's life is something that many leading thinkers recognize. The Swiss philosopher Carl Hilty (1833–1909), for instance, writes: "Every illness leaves its mark, like the floodwaters of our rivers. One who correctly apprehends and endures illness becomes deeper, stronger, bigger; he gains insights and convictions that would previously never have occurred to him."²²

In our case, we base our lives on the Mystic Law. When we do so, there is no suffering that we cannot transform into happiness. Those who are battling illness are climbing the lofty mountain of Buddhahood. When they reach the summit, they will be

²² Translated from German. C. Hilty, *Neue Briefe* (New Letters) (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1906), p. 49.

able to enjoy a vast and magnificent view. All of their present hardship and suffering thus become a precious treasure for the purpose of constructing eternal happiness.

In this letter, the Daishonin teaches the young Tokimitsu of this great beneficial power of Buddhism.

A person who is never defeated, never daunted, and who never gives up, no matter what happens, is a victor in life and a true champion of health and longevity.

My wife and I will continue to pray wholeheartedly for all of our members to enjoy long, healthy, fulfilling lives. For by living such lives, our members will show brilliant actual proof of the power of faith in the Daishonin's Buddhism, thereby winning wide support and understanding for our movement around the world and serving as a guiding light for a century of life.

I pray fervently
for our resounding victory,
and for all our members
to enjoy good health
and lead long, fulfilling lives.

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