

'The Proof of the Lotus Sutra' - The Prayers of a Votary of the Lotus Sutra to Overcome Illness¹

(...) 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. (...)

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 hundred thousand million Buddhas in their past existences.²

[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."³ 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. (...) 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

¹ SGI Newsletter 8098.

² 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]).

³ Miao-lo's *Annotations on "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra."*

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, but who then pushes himself up from the ground and rises to his feet again"⁴ (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. (...) 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"⁵ 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. (...)

In "On Curing Karmic Disease," which is addressed to the lay priest Ota, Nichiren 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."⁶

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). (...) Being gravely ill doesn't necessarily mean that one will die. The Daishonin writes to the

⁴ 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).

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.

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. (...) He 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 by rights be called an evil man,⁷ 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]⁸ and evil spirits⁹ 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 devils¹⁰ 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

⁷ The Daishonin says this because the work of a warrior involves killing.

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.”

¹⁰ 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.

commending the young man's parents on their strong faith. 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 Persecution¹¹ took place, Tokimitsu had striven tirelessly to protect his fellow practitioners and applied himself with unflinching devotion to his Buddhist practice.(...)

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. (...)

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.¹²

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

¹¹ 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."

¹² Translated from Japanese. Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, *Makiguchi Tsunesaburo Shingenshu* (Selected Quotes of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi), edited by Takehisa Tsuji (Tokyo: Daisanbunmei-sha, 1979), pp. 196–97.

illness but all kinds of difficulties in life, and to opening wide the path to attaining Buddhahood without fail. (...)

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).¹³

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. (...)

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-renge-kyo—the daimoku of the Mystic Law—of which the Daishonin declares: “Only the ship of Myoho-renge-kyo enables one to cross the sea of the sufferings of birth and death” (WND-1, 33). (...) All that matters is that we keep moving forward in our hearts each day, even if only a fraction of an inch. (...)

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. (...)

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 pieces¹⁴ 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)

“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,

¹³ 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).

¹⁴ 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]).

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. (...)

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. (...) 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.