

Tuesday, July 7, 2009

SGI President Ikeda's Study Lecture Series**LEARNING FROM THE WRITINGS OF NICHIREN DAISHONIN:
THE TEACHINGS FOR VICTORY****[5] “Letter to the Brothers”—Part 2 [of 3]**

Pursue the Great Path of Mentor and Disciple, Regarding Hardships as a Badge of Honor

We, who now believe in the correct teaching, in the past once committed the offense of persecuting its practitioners, and therefore are destined to fall into a terrible hell in the future. The blessings gained by practicing the correct teaching, however, are so great that by meeting minor sufferings in this life we can change the karma that destines us to suffer terribly in the future. As the [Parinirvana Sutra] says, one's past slander may cause one to suffer various retributions, such as being born into a poor family or a family with erroneous views or being persecuted by one's sovereign. A “family with erroneous views” means one that slanders the correct teaching, and “persecution by one's sovereign” means to live under the reign of an evil ruler. These are the two sufferings confronting you [the Ikegami brothers] now. . . .

Both of you have continued believing in the Lotus Sutra; thus you are now ridding yourselves of your grave offenses from the past. For example, the flaws in iron come to the surface when it is forged. Put into flames, a rock simply turns to ashes, but gold becomes pure gold.

This trial [of disownment by your father], more than anything else, will prove your faith genuine, and the ten demon daughters of the Lotus Sutra will surely protect you. The demon who appeared to test the boy Snow Mountains was actually Shakra. The dove saved by King Shibi was the heavenly king Vaishravana. It is even possible that the ten demon daughters have possessed your parents and are tormenting you

in order to test your faith. Any weakness in faith will be a cause for regret. The cart that overturns on the road ahead is a warning to the one behind. In an age like this no one can help but thirst for the way. You may hate this world, but you cannot escape it. The people of Japan are certain to meet with terrible misfortune in the immediate future. (WND-1, 497)

You must grit your teeth and never slacken in your faith. Be as fearless as Nichiren when he acted and spoke out before Hei no Saemon-no-jo. Although theirs was not the path to Buddhahood, the sons of Lord Wada and of the governor of Wakasa, as well as the warriors under Masakado and Sadato, fought to the death to preserve their honor. Death comes to all, even should nothing untoward ever happen. Therefore, you must never be cowardly, or you will become the object of ridicule. (WND-1, 498)

When the Thus Come One Shakyamuni was a prince, his father, King Shuddhodana, could not bear losing his only heir and so would not allow him to renounce his royal station. The king kept two thousand soldiers posted at the palace's four gates to prevent him from leaving. Nevertheless, the prince eventually left the palace against his father's will. In all worldly affairs, it is the son's duty to obey his parents, yet on the path to Buddhahood, disobeying one's parents ultimately constitutes filial piety. (WND-1, 499)

Lecture

“In making the ascent from a low-lying mountain to a high mountain, you will inevitably have to pass through valleys in between,” my mentor, second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda, once said. He then continued by way of explanation:

If attaining Buddhahood is compared to reaching the summit of the highest mountain, then the benefit you receive upon first taking faith corresponds merely to scaling a low-lying mountain. Attaining Buddhahood means scaling

a far higher mountain. It is vital that you don't lose your way in the valleys you pass through on your journey. These are valleys where the three obstacles and four devils¹ vie with one another to attack. You mustn't become drunk on the benefit that you receive upon first taking faith. You mustn't become remiss in your daily Buddhist practice, but always remember that the purpose of faith is to climb out of these valleys.

This was Mr. Toda's guidance to a group of members, most of whom were experiencing the first benefits of practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. They had all joined the Soka Gakkai amid the continuing confusion and turmoil of the early postwar years. He was teaching them in a readily accessible way that the true benefit of faith is attaining an unshakable state of absolute happiness, and that in order to reach the highest summit of Buddhahood, they must press onward through the valleys of training and development, which are all ultimately part of our Buddhist practice.

As we traverse these valleys on the way to ascending the highest summit, various obstacles will emerge to hinder our progress. Yet without passing through valleys and climbing up steep inclines, we cannot reach the top. The appearance of the three obstacles and four devils serves to show that we are on the correct path of Buddhist practice.

With Mr. Toda's encouragement and kindly face engraved in their hearts, our pioneering members bravely challenged the onslaughts of the three obstacles and four devils, and forged an inner state of indestructible happiness. Battling devilish functions is the direct path to attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime. This is a pivotal tenet of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

In "Letter to the Brothers," the Daishonin teaches the embattled Ikegami brothers, Munenaka and Munenaga, the essence of faith for defeating obstacles and devilish functions and ultimately attaining Buddhahood. He goes on to discuss from three perspectives the reason that practitioners of the Lotus Sutra encounter hardships, and the significance of those hardships.

First, he explains that hardships arise due to the devil king of the sixth heaven²

¹ 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.

² Devil king of the sixth heaven: Also, devil king or heavenly devil. The king of devils, who dwells in the highest or the sixth heaven of the world of desire. He is also named Freely Enjoying Things Conjured by Others, the king who makes free use of the fruits of others' efforts for his own pleasure. Served by innumerable minions, he obstructs Buddhist practice and delights in sapping the life force of other beings. The devil king is a personification of the negative tendency to force others to one's will at any cost.

harassing practitioners by negatively influencing those around them—including people of wisdom, the ruler, and the practitioners’ own parents, partners, or children—to prevent them from obtaining enlightenment. I discussed this principle in the previous installment of this series.

Second, the Daishonin explains that practitioners encounter hardships due to their own karma from past lifetimes. He goes on to clarify, however, that hardships that arise as a result of practicing the Lotus Sutra should in fact be considered a benefit in the form of lessening one’s karmic retribution.³

Third, he explains that hardships can also be seen as an ordeal devised by the heavenly deities—the protective functions of the universe—to test the strength of a person’s faith. As such, hardships represent an opportunity to forge and develop one’s life with a view to attaining Buddhahood.

In this installment, I will focus on the second and third perspectives.

We, who now believe in the correct teaching [of the Lotus Sutra], in the past once committed the offense of persecuting its practitioners, and therefore are destined to fall into a terrible hell in the future. The blessings gained by practicing the correct teaching, however, are so great that by meeting minor sufferings in this life we can change the karma that destines us to suffer terribly in the future. As the sutra says, one’s past slander may cause one to suffer various retributions, such as [suffering as a result of] being born into a poor family or a family with erroneous views or being persecuted by one’s sovereign. A “family with erroneous views” means one that slanders the correct teaching, and “persecution by one’s sovereign” means to live under the reign of an evil ruler. These are the two sufferings confronting you [the Ikegami brothers] now. (WND-1, 497)

³ Lessening one’s 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.

Hardships Are Proof of Lessening Karmic Retribution

In this section, the Daishonin explains that although practitioners of the correct teaching of the Lotus Sutra may meet with great hardships as a result of their Buddhist practice, this is actually a benefit because it enables them to lessen their karmic retribution and fundamentally change their karma. For instance, he says, we may have persecuted practitioners of the Lotus Sutra in a past existence, an offense that would normally destine us “to fall into a terrible hell in the future” (WND-1, 497), but because of the powerful benefit of our Buddhist practice in this lifetime, we can call forth the retribution of great suffering that awaits us in the future and instead experience it in the present in a lesser form.

Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism—a teaching of changing karma—first of all recognizes that the cause of all negative karma can essentially be traced to disbelief in and disrespect for the Mystic Law—which is termed “slander of the Law.” This clarification of fundamental evil also illuminates what constitutes fundamental good. If we are to change our karma, a clear understanding of the basic causality of good and evil in life is vital.

One form that this fundamental evil of slander takes is people denigrating the Lotus Sutra, a teaching of universal enlightenment, because they are unable to believe that everyone possesses the Buddha nature.⁴ Another manifestation of slander is people maligning and attacking the sutra’s votary who is dedicated to helping others reveal their Buddha nature. Fundamental good, therefore, is the exact opposite—namely, upholding and preserving the teachings of the Lotus Sutra and fighting together with the votary of the Lotus Sutra against this most basic evil—that of denying people’s Buddha nature.

Receiving the painful retributions we were destined to incur in the future in a lesser form in the present through the “blessings obtained by protecting the Law”⁵ (WND-1, 497) is the heart of the Buddhist principle of “lessening one’s karmic retribution.” By experiencing hardships in the course of practicing the Mystic Law in this life, “the sufferings of hell vanish instantly” (WND-1, 199), and then, “completely freed from these grave offenses” (cf. WND-1, 281), we can attain the sublime life-state of Buddhahood. In other words, we can change the inner direction of our lives—

⁴ Buddha nature: The internal cause or potential for attaining Buddhahood.

⁵ In “Letter to the Brothers,” the Daishonin cites the Parinirvana Sutra: “It is due to the blessings obtained by protecting the Law that they can diminish in this lifetime their suffering and retribution” (WND-1, 497).

moving from the negative cycle of transmigration in the evil paths to the positive cycle of transmigration in the realm of Buddhahood. This is the Daishonin's teaching of changing karma.

Consequently, the hardships we experience in the course of our Buddhist practice as a result of the principle of lessening karmic retribution are the benefits or blessings of protecting the Law. They could also be called proof that we are changing karma.

In the above passage from "Letter to the Brothers," the Daishonin singles out two of the eight kinds of retribution described in the Parinirvana Sutra⁶ as specific examples of "minor sufferings" encountered in this lifetime as a function of lessening karmic retribution. These are the sufferings arising from (1) being born into a family with erroneous views and (2) falling victim to persecution by one's sovereign. He asserts that both of these reflect the situation facing the Ikegami brothers.

The Daishonin explains that a "family with erroneous views" means a family that slanders the correct teaching of the Lotus Sutra, while "persecution by one's sovereign" means to live under the reign of an evil ruler. The latter specifically refers to being born in an age when the ruler and society as a whole persecute the votary of the Lotus Sutra. These circumstances had come to function as sufferings or hardships for the Ikegami brothers as a result of their earnest efforts to propagate the Mystic Law alongside the Daishonin. This fact also clearly proved that the brothers were practicing with the same commitment as their teacher in faith.

Both of you have continued believing in the Lotus Sutra; thus you are now [bringing forth retribution and thereby] ridding yourselves of your grave offenses from the past. For example, the flaws in iron come to the surface when it is forged. Put into flames, a rock simply turns to ashes, but gold becomes pure gold. (WND-1, 497)

⁶ Parinirvana Sutra: Also known as the Mahaparinirvana Sutra. A Chinese version of the Nirvana Sutra in six volumes, translated by Fa-hsien and Buddhahadra around 417. It describes eight kinds of sufferings: (1) to be despised, (2) to be cursed with an ugly appearance, (3) to be poorly clad, (4) to be poorly fed, (5) to seek wealth in vain, (6) to be born to an impoverished and lowly family, (7) to be born to a family with erroneous views, and (8) to be persecuted by the sovereign. For a detailed discussion of these eight kinds of suffering, see part 1 of President Ikeda's lecture on "Letter to the Brothers."

The Process of Changing Karma Forges and Polishes Our Lives to the Highest Degree

When iron is repeatedly heated and hammered, impurities that can give rise to brittleness are literally driven out and, when the forging process is continued further, the iron becomes even stronger. In the same way, the Daishonin says, the Ikegami brothers are experiencing retribution in the form of hardships in this lifetime because, due to their strong faith, they are drawing forth retribution for past grave offenses and thereby expiating their negative karma.

As this passage indicates, when viewed in terms of the Buddhist principles of lessening karmic retribution and changing karma, hardships take on deeper meaning, and come to signify an opportunity for forging and developing our faith and our inner state of life.

Elsewhere [in “Letter from Sado”], the Daishonin writes: “Iron, when heated in the flames and pounded, becomes a fine sword” (WND-1, 303). The process of confronting and challenging our karma enables us to polish and strengthen our faith. It is when we are tested by the fires of karma that we can show our true mettle. If we are irresolute, we will be like ash and crumble, but if we maintain a firm resolve, we will become pure gold, our lives growing ever more radiant.

The supreme purpose of Buddhism is to forge, polish, and strengthen our lives. Without polishing and developing, people with ability and talent will not shine their brightest. Without training, people of genuine commitment will not be fostered. By striving wholeheartedly for the sake of kosen-rufu, we can transform our negative karma from past existences and bring our lives to shine with the brilliance of a gleaming, unbreakable sword.

Speaking of training and development, on the Soka path of mentor and disciple walked by our first and second presidents Mr. Makiguchi and Mr. Toda, and by Mr. Toda and me, every day was one of ceaselessly forging and polishing our lives. Mr. Toda was 19 years old when he met Mr. Makiguchi. In a diary entry the following year, in April 1920, Mr. Toda wrote:

I must forge myself so that I can take on the great mission of being an asset to my country and a leader of the world, and I must polish myself so that I can carry out that mission. . . . I will pay no attention to the criticism or derision of my contemporaries; all that matters is that I achieve my goal.⁷

⁷ Josei Toda, *Wakaki Hi no Shuki Gokuchu-ki* (The Diaries of My Youth and My Imprisonment) (Tokyo: Seiga Shobo, 1970), p. 86.

At the time, the young Mr. Toda had just been hired as a temporary substitute teacher at the Nishimachi Elementary School (in present-day Taito Ward, Tokyo), where Mr. Makiguchi was the principal. Having encountered a great mentor in life, he made a deep determination to “forge” himself—that is, to polish his character and ability and to develop himself mentally and physically—so that he could realize a great objective.

I was also 19 years old when I had my fateful meeting with Mr. Toda, and embarked on the great and noble path of striving with the same commitment as my mentor. Even at the time of bitterest adversity when Mr. Toda’s businesses fell into dire financial straits, I continued to give my all to support and protect him, taking on the full brunt of all criticism from society.

The following entry in my diary in December 1950 expresses my feelings at that challenging time:

Struggles and hardships!

In their midst, you will develop true humanity.

In their midst, you will forge an iron will.

In their midst, you will know real tears.

In their midst, know that there lies the human revolution.⁸

Many individuals who had been incredibly indebted to Mr. Toda abruptly turned on him. Betraying his kindness, they showered him with curses and abuse and deserted him. But I did not waver in the least. It was an honor to undergo hardships with my mentor. Forging one’s life amid adversity is the path to victory. I prayed earnestly that Mr. Toda would be able to take the lead of our movement for kosen-rufu as the Soka Gakkai’s second president, and I fought a desperate, all-out struggle to make that happen.

This trial [of disownment by your father], more than anything else, will

⁸ Daisaku Ikeda, *A Youthful Diary: One Man’s Journey from the Beginning of Faith to Worldwide Leadership for Peace* (Santa Monica, California: World Tribune Press, 2000), p. 67.

prove your faith genuine, and the ten demon daughters of the Lotus Sutra will surely protect you. The demon who appeared to test the boy Snow Mountains⁹ was actually Shakra.¹⁰ The dove saved by King Shibi¹¹ was the heavenly king Vaishravana.¹² It is even possible that the ten demon daughters¹³ have possessed your parents and are tormenting you in order to test your faith. (WND-1, 497)

Heavenly Deities Test One's Faith

Next, the Daishonin assures the Ikegami brothers that their demonstration of genuine faith guarantees the protection of the heavenly deities, who vowed in the Lotus Sutra to safeguard the sutra's practitioners. Having said this, he then goes on to add that the heavenly deities at times also seek to test people's faith to see if it is genuine. This, he says, is like what happened when the god Shakra took the form of a demon to test the seeking spirit of the boy Snow Mountains, or when the heavenly king Vaishravana

⁹ The boy Snow Mountains: The name of Shakyamuni Buddha in a previous lifetime when he was practicing austerities. The god Shakra, having decided to test his resolve, appeared before the boy Snow Mountains in the form of a hungry demon and recited half a verse from a Buddhist teaching. The boy begged the demon to tell him the second half of the verse. The demon agreed, but demanded flesh and blood in payment. The boy Snow Mountains gladly promised to offer his own body to the demon, who in turn gave him the latter half of the teaching. When the boy was about to fulfill his promise, the demon changed back into Shakra and caught him. He praised the boy Snow Mountains for his willingness to give his life for the Law.

¹⁰ Shakra: Also known as Shakra Devanam Indra, or simply Indra. The lord or king of gods in early Vedic and Hindu belief, and one of the two principal protective gods of Buddhism, the other being Brahma. Shakra is depicted in many sutras as testing Buddhist practitioners' resolve. This he often does by assuming various forms, such as that of a Brahman or a demon. According to the "Introduction" (1st) chapter of the Lotus Sutra, he took part in the assembly on Eagle Peak at which the sutra was preached, with twenty thousand retainers accompanying him.

¹¹ King Shibi: The name of Shakyamuni in a past life when he was carrying out bodhisattva practice. One day, the god Vaishravana (or, according to some sources, the god Vishvakarman) and the god Shakra decided to test him. They disguised themselves respectively as a dove and a hawk, the hawk relentlessly pursuing the dove, which flew into King Shibi's robes for protection. The hungry hawk demanded the dove as food, and Shibi decided that to save the dove he would offer the hawk an amount of his own flesh equal to the weight of the dove.

¹² Vaishravana: One of the four heavenly kings of Buddhist mythology, of whom he is often regarded as foremost. This god is said to always protect the place where the Buddha preaches. In the "Dharani" (26th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra, he pledges to protect the votaries of the sutra. In Japan, as one of the seven beneficent deities, he is called Bishamon-ten. Vaishravana is known as Kubera in Hindu mythology, the king of yakshas and the god of wealth.

¹³ Ten demon daughters: Ten female protective deities who appear in the Lotus Sutra as the "daughters of rakshasa demons" or the "ten rakshasa daughters." In the sutra's "Dharani" (26th) chapter, they vow to guard and protect the sutra's votaries, saying that they will inflict punishment on any who trouble the sutra's practitioners.

took the form of a dove to test the compassion of King Shibi.

Based on this principle, the Daishonin suggests that the brothers' present ordeal—that of the elder brother being disowned by their father on account of his Buddhist practice—is probably an instance of the ten demon daughters negatively influencing the brothers' parents to torment them in order to test their faith.

In other writings as well, the Daishonin discusses this principle of heavenly deities creating obstacles to test the faith of practitioners. For example, at the time of the Atsuhara Persecution,¹⁴ farmer followers of the Daishonin were subjected to cruel interrogation on account of their faith by the powerful official Hei no Saemon.¹⁵ But not a single one of them recanted their beliefs. Even in the face of persecution by the authorities, they fearlessly continued chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. As soon as the news reached him, the Daishonin immediately wrote [to Nikko Shonin and other close disciples] in a letter titled, "Reply to the Sages":

I am sure that the ten demon daughters must have taken possession of Hei no Saemon and induced him to test the faith of these votaries of the Lotus Sutra. It was similar to the way in which the boy Snow Mountains and King Shibi were tested. [Or perhaps even] an evil demon had taken possession of Hei no Saemon. (WND-2, 831)

Here, the Daishonin says that the ten demon daughters [who are considered heavenly deities] or an evil demon had very likely "taken possession" of Hei no Saemon.

In the last installment, we looked at persecution befalling practitioners of the Lotus Sutra from the perspective of it being a function of evil demons—specifically, the workings of the devil king of the sixth heaven taking possession, or negatively influencing, people of wisdom, the ruler, and parents to harass practitioners.

Why on earth, then, would heavenly deities such as the ten demon daughters—rightly the protective forces of the universe—take possession of Hei no Saemon and thereby try to test the faith of the farmer followers of Atsuhara? In Buddhism, unrelenting faith is the cause for attaining enlightenment, and obstacles are viewed as

¹⁴ Atsuhara Persecution: A series of threats and acts of violence against followers of Nichiren in Atsuhara Village, in Fuji District of Suruga Province, starting in around 1275 and continuing until around 1283. In 1279, 20 farmers, all believers, were arrested on false charges. They were interrogated by Hei no Saemon, who demanded that they renounce their faith. However, not one of them yielded. Hei no Saemon eventually had three of them executed.

¹⁵ Hei no Saemon (d. 1293): Also known as Hei no Saemon-no-jo Yoritsuna. A leading official in the Hojo regency, the de facto ruling body of Japan during the Kamakura period. He served two successive regents, Hojo Tokimune and Hojo Sadatoki, and wielded tremendous influence as deputy chief of the Office of Military and Police Affairs. He collaborated with Ryokan and other leading priests to persecute Nichiren and his followers.

an inevitable consequence of upholding the correct teaching of the Lotus Sutra. The crux of the matter, therefore, is whether, when great hardships or persecutions arise, we are consumed by fear and abandon our faith, or muster our courage and remain steadfast.

If our resolve is weak and we discard our faith, it means we have been defeated by the torments of the devil king of the sixth heaven. But if we win over such painful ordeals with firm resolve and maintain unwavering faith, then it will be possible for us to take the view in hindsight that we may also have passed a test by the heavenly deities. In other words, everything depends on our own heart or resolve. The protection of the heavenly deities is in essence nothing more than the power of our own faith.

Mr. Toda declared:

The Daishonin writes in the Gosho that he regards Hei no Saemon—an archenemy of Buddhism who has unceasingly harassed him—as a good friend or positive influence for his own Buddhist practice (cf. WND-1, 770).¹⁶ Never fear enemies! Their onslaughts are all just swirling dark winds that help us perfect ourselves and attain Buddhahood.

This is the lionhearted spirit of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. It is crucial that we have a fearless spirit, a fearless resolve.

In his writings, the Daishonin frequently cites the line from the Great Teacher Miao-lo¹⁷ of China: "The stronger one's faith, the greater the protection of the gods."¹⁸ The heavenly deities will unfailingly protect practitioners of the Lotus Sutra whose faith is genuine.

In "Reply to the Sages," which I quoted earlier, the Daishonin further explains that the two Buddhas Shakyamuni and Many Treasures, as well as the Buddhas of the ten directions and the heavenly deities, made a solemn vow at the assembly where the Lotus Sutra was preached, promising to guard and protect the sutra's votaries (cf. WND-2, 831). He also says that based on the principle of "changing poison into

¹⁶ The Daishonin writes: "For me, Nichiren, my best allies in attaining Buddhahood are Kagenobu, the priests Ryokan, Doryu, and Doamidabutsu, and Hei no Saemon and the lord of Sagami. I am grateful when I think that without them I could not have proved myself to be the votary of the Lotus Sutra" (WND-1, 770).

¹⁷ The Great Teacher Miao-lo (711–782): Sixth patriarch of the T'ien-t'ai school in China. His works include *The Annotations on "Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra,"* *The Annotations on "Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra,"* and *The Annotations on "Great Concentration and Insight."*

¹⁸ Miao-lo's *Annotations on "Great Concentration and Insight."*

medicine,”¹⁹ reward and punishment will be forthcoming where they are deserved.

Truly the heart is what matters most. Our own faith is what ultimately determines our future victory.

The German poet and novelist Hermann Hesse (1877–1962) wrote to the effect that only those who have the courage to fulfill their destinies can be called heroes.²⁰ Those confident that everything begins with their own inner transformation are people of true courage and heroism, and can forge lasting happiness for themselves.

Any weakness in faith will be a cause for regret. The cart that overturns on the road ahead is a warning to the one behind. In an age like this no one can help but thirst for the way. You may hate this world, but you cannot escape it. The people of Japan are certain to meet with terrible misfortune in the immediate future [just as they are already experiencing now because of recent events].

Maintaining Steadfast Faith at a Crucial Moment

“Any weakness in faith will be a cause for regret” (WND-1, 497)—we can read these words as an admonition for all who practice the Daishonin’s Buddhism.

Ultimately, everything hinges on whether we can realize how fortunate we are to have encountered “a person who expounds this sutra exactly as the sutra directs” (WND-1, 495), and to be able to strive with this teacher to propagate the Mystic Law. If our faith or resolve is weak at a crucial time, we’ll be left with eternal regret.

When we encounter obstacles in the course of our Buddhist practice, we in fact find ourselves at a momentous crossroads, a vital juncture, that will decide whether we open the gateway to attaining Buddhahood forever through strong faith or instead close off the path to happiness as a result of forsaking our faith.

Whenever great obstacles confront us, let’s always challenge them intrepidly, bearing in mind this passage from the Daishonin’s treatise “The Opening of the Eyes”:

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ Translated from German. Hermann Hesse, “Eigensinn” (Self Will), in *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Verlag, 1987), vol. 10, p. 457.

Although I and my disciples may encounter various difficulties, if we do not harbor doubts in our hearts, we will as a matter of course attain Buddhahood. Do not have doubts simply because heaven does not lend you protection. Do not be discouraged because you do not enjoy an easy and secure existence in this life. This is what I have taught my disciples morning and evening, and yet they begin to harbor doubts and abandon their faith. Foolish men are likely to forget the promises they have made when the crucial moment comes. (WND-1, 283)

Putting the spirit of this passage into action is the eternal lifeline of the Soka Gakkai. If we keep advancing with these words of the Daishonin as our point of reference, our faith will shine with indestructible brilliance.

Based on the spirit of this passage, any time we face hardships is a “crucial moment.” It is, therefore, essential that we have the kind of dauntless faith that will enable us to fight back bravely at such times—for instance, when the three obstacles and four devils strike, when we are challenging ourselves to change our karma, or when we are engaged in a win-or-lose struggle for kosen-rufu. We should realize that every day we can learn this spirit of faith from the Daishonin’s example. We must never be foolish people who cave in at a crucial moment.

If our faith is weak or shallow, or if we are foolish, we will end up drifting along aimlessly like floating weeds, lacking any fundamental purpose. Human beings are animals that seek meaning in life. Through this earnest pursuit, it is possible to give infinitely profound meaning to our existence. Members of the Gakkai can limitlessly deepen their faith and the meaning of their lives, for they are all experts in the art of living and the art of happiness.

In this passage from “Letter to the Brothers,” the Daishonin further says: “In an age like this no one can help but thirst for the way” (WND-1, 497). These words reflect the situation in society at that time, where people were filled with anxiety and uncertainty toward the future. During the Daishonin’s day, there were repeated famines, epidemics, and natural disasters. Certainly such an age would spur thinking people to seek the Buddha way. The more confused and disordered a society becomes, the more people will look to find a profound philosophy on which to base their lives. The Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin is truly the Buddhism of the sun in that it has the power to illuminate the darkness of the evil age of the Latter Day of the Law.

But Japan, far from according the Daishonin the proper respect he deserved, attacked and persecuted him. As a result, his predictions warning of internal strife and foreign invasion came to pass. The country was plunged into a dire predicament that it

was helpless to remedy. The inescapable suffering and misery that faced the entire land was a manifestation of what in Buddhism is termed “general punishment”—punishment that falls upon the people as a whole for slander of the Law. In “Letter to the Brothers,” the Daishonin declares that this state of affairs is self-evident given the recent events that have taken place—namely, internal strife in the form of the February Disturbance²¹ (in 1272) and the Mongol invasion²² (in 1274).

Especially after the first Mongol invasion, great anxiety spread throughout Japan as the entire country engaged in preparations for a second invasion that was surely imminent. A passage in “Letter to the Brothers” vividly captures the fear that gripped those who went off to confront the Mongol forces:

They had to leave behind their aged parents, small children, young wives, and cherished homes to go out and defend a sea to no avail. If they see clouds on the horizon, they imagine them to be the enemy’s banners. If they see fishing boats, they think them Mongol warships and are paralyzed with fear. (WND-1, 497–98)

The sufferings of war are the same in any age. They are marked by painful partings from family and loved ones and living with the constant knowledge that death may come at any moment. It is always the ordinary people who suffer most in war. Therefore, war must be prevented at all costs. This is the eternal cry of Buddhists.

The Daishonin says of the mood prevalent among people in society: “Though still alive, they feel as if they were in the world of asuras”²³ (WND-1, 498). In one respect, his struggle was to transform such a society into one in which all people could enjoy peace and happiness.

At any rate, the responsibility for the situation that was causing immense suffering to the people lay with the country’s ruler who had sided with unscrupulous and ill-intentioned individuals to persecute the Daishonin, a person of the greatest

²¹ February Disturbance: Also, the Disturbance of February 1272. A revolt that took place within the ruling Hojo clan. It resulted in fighting in Kyoto and Kamakura. In the second month of 1272, Hojo Tokisuke revolted against his younger half brother, the regent Hojo Tokimune, in an attempt to seize power. Tokisuke and others, including Nagoe Tokiakira and Nagoe Noritoki, were killed on suspicion of involvement. It is also known as the Hojo Tokisuke disturbance.

²² Mongol invasion: The Mongols had already attempted one invasion in 1274. The second Mongol invasion took place several years later in 1281.

²³ World of asuras: Also, realm of asuras, world of animosity, or world of anger. The fourth of the Ten Worlds and one of the four evil paths. When viewed as a state of life, the world of asuras is a condition dominated by egoistic pride. Persons in this state are compelled by the need to be superior to others in all things, valuing themselves and devaluing others. Asuras, belligerent spirits or demons in Indian mythology, were regarded as typifying this condition of life.

good. The Daishonin keenly observes that ultimately the Ikegami brothers were being treated harshly by their father because the ruler had been led astray by evil priests and had become an enemy of the Lotus Sutra (cf. WND-1, 498).

Buddhism is win or lose. The Daishonin writes: “You must . . . see for yourselves the blessings of the Lotus Sutra. I, Nichiren, will also emphatically call on the heavenly gods” (WND-1, 498). He powerfully urges the two brothers to join him in showing everyone the truth of the great teaching they uphold through their united prayers and solidarity as mentor and disciple.

The Daishonin consistently teaches these cherished disciples to boldly confront devilish functions or negative forces, to always take the offensive in this struggle. If one is passive or fearful, such negative forces will only grow stronger. He instructs them: “You must never be cowardly” (WND-1, 498). Mr. Toda once also said quite sternly: “What can the fainthearted who shun difficulties possibly accomplish? I’m sure none of my disciples fit that description.” He also declared: “The Soka Gakkai is an organization of lions, a gathering of lions. We have no use for cowards!”

You must grit your teeth and never slacken in your faith. Be as fearless as Nichiren when he acted and spoke out before [the most powerful ruler in the land] Hei no Saemon-no-jo. Although theirs was not the path to Buddhahood, the sons of Lord Wada and of the governor of Wakasa,²⁴ as well as the warriors under Masakado and Sadato,²⁵ fought to the death to preserve their honor. Death comes to all, even should nothing untoward ever happen. Therefore, you must never be cowardly, or you will become the object of ridicule. (WND-1, 498)

“You Must Grit Your Teeth and Never Slacken in Your Faith”

²⁴ Lord Wada is Wada Yoshimori (1147–1213), a military official of the Kamakura regime, who was tricked into fighting against the Hojo clan and whose entire family was wiped out. The governor of Wakasa is Miura Yasumura (d. 1247), who was related to the Hojo by marriage, but was accused of treason; he and his entire family lost their lives in battle.

²⁵ Masakado is Taira no Masakado (d. 940), a warrior who wielded power in eastern Japan, and Sadato is Abe no Sadato (1019–62), the head of a powerful family in eastern Japan. They both were killed in a battle with the imperial forces.

The Daishonin repeatedly encourages the Ikegami brothers who were experiencing adversity on account of their faith, writing to them: “You must neither show nor feel any fear,” and “Never slacken in your faith” (WND-1, 498).

The purpose of our faith is to establish a serene state of happiness that nothing can destroy. Through his encouragement, therefore, the Daishonin no doubt sought to urge the brothers to view their present struggles as an opportunity to build and strengthen their character so that they could remain undaunted in the face of any hardship.

The Daishonin’s Buddhism is a teaching of mentor and disciple. If the mentor is a lion king, the disciples must also be lion kings. The mentor thus solemnly calls on his disciples to learn from and follow his example. As indicated by the statement, “Be as fearless as Nichiren when he acted and spoke out before Hei no Saemon-no-jo” (WND-1, 498), the Daishonin instructs the brothers to persevere in faith and fight boldly with the same resolute spirit that he has shown in his struggles.

Here, mention of the Daishonin’s conduct toward Hei no Saemon refers to the two occasions when he remonstrated with this powerful figure at the time of the Tatsunokuchi Persecution in September 1271, and again after being pardoned from exile to Sado in April 1274. At Tatsunokuchi, the Daishonin declared with towering conviction to Hei no Saemon: “Nichiren is the pillar and beam of Japan. Doing away with me is toppling the pillar of Japan!” (WND-1, 579). And after returning to Kamakura from Sado, he also bluntly told Hei no Saemon: “Even if it seems that, because I was born in the ruler’s domain, I follow him in my actions, I will never follow him in my heart” (WND-1, 579). He is referring specifically to the authoritarian regime of the Kamakura military government: while he might be physically forced to submit to its dictates, his spirit can never be forced to do so.

These were defiant statements free of the slightest fear or servility. Similarly, disciples who embrace the Daishonin’s spirit and model their own actions on his example also have nothing to fear. By following the Daishonin’s lead and joining in his struggle, they can bring forth infinite strength and potential.

Incidentally, the latter quote, which is from the Daishonin’s writing “The Selection of the Time,” was included in the *Birthright of Man*, a collection of inspiring quotes on human rights compiled by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).²⁶

Returning to “Letter to the Brothers,” the Daishonin also writes: “Death comes to

²⁶ *Birthright of Man: A Selection of Texts*, edited by Jeanne Hersch (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1969), p. 127.

all, even should nothing untoward ever happen” (WND-1, 498). This quote from the Daishonin is one that has left a deep impression on me in the course of my more than half century of Buddhist practice.

As human beings, we will all have to die sometime. No one can escape this reality. The important thing is how we use this unique and precious existence. In a letter addressed to his youthful disciple Nanjo Tokimitsu,²⁷ the Daishonin writes:

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. (WND-1, 1003)

In a similar vein, Mr. Toda said:

Death is momentary, but life is eternal. The members of the Soka Gakkai have now raised the great banner of kosen-rufu. This is truly the time of kosen-rufu. We must be courageous.²⁸

With these words, Mr. Toda rose up alone, shouldering the banner of the propagation of the Mystic Law, and went on to accomplish a Soka Gakkai membership of 750,000 households.

He also once said to us youth division members:

When you [die and] take your seat alongside Shakyamuni’s disciples at Eagle Peak,²⁹ if everyone there ridicules you, saying, “The youth of the Latter Day are a cowardly lot,” then you will be unworthy of the title of Bodhisattvas of the Earth.³⁰

These strict words of encouragement were in keeping with the Daishonin’s injunction: “You must never be cowardly, or you will become the object of ridicule” (WND-1,

²⁷ 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 Atsuhara Persecution, he used his influence to protect his fellow practitioners, sheltering some in his home.

²⁸ Translated from Japanese: Josei Toda, *Toda Josei Zenshu* (Collected Writings of Josei Toda) (Tokyo: Seikyo Shimbunsha, 1983), vol. 3, p. 72.

²⁹ Eagle Peak: The place where Shakyamuni preached the Lotus Sutra. It is also called the pure land of Eagle Peak, and symbolizes the Buddha land or the eternal state of Buddhahood.

³⁰ Translated from Japanese: Josei Toda, *Toda Josei Zenshu* (Collected Writings of Josei Toda) (Tokyo: Seikyo Shimbunsha, 1981), vol. 1, p. 59.

When the Thus Come One Shakyamuni was a prince, his father, King Shuddhodana,³¹ could not bear losing his only heir and so would not allow him to renounce his royal station. The king kept two thousand soldiers posted at the palace's four gates to prevent him from leaving. Nevertheless, the prince eventually left the palace against his father's will. In all worldly affairs, it is the son's duty to obey his parents, yet on the path to Buddhahood, disobeying one's parents ultimately constitutes filial piety.³² (WND-1, 499)

The Meaning of True Filial Devotion

After explaining the importance of maintaining unwavering faith in light of various Buddhist teachings, the Daishonin continues to offer further encouragement to drive his point home, citing a number of historical anecdotes. He does this because he is especially worried about the faith of the younger brother, Munenaga [who might be tempted to recant his faith and become his father's heir now that the elder Munenaka had been disowned].

The Daishonin always poured his whole life into encouraging his followers, not stopping until he was sure they understood his message from the depths of their lives and were ready to rise up to take action themselves. Being absolutely determined that they not be defeated by devilish functions and wishing to ensure they stood up as genuine disciples, the Daishonin continued to guide and instruct them with wisdom

³¹ King Shuddhodana: A king of Kapilavastu in northern India. Shuddhodana's first wife, Maya, died seven days after giving birth to Shakyamuni, after which he married Maya's younger sister, Mahaprajapati. With Mahaprajapati, he had another son, Nanda. Shuddhodana originally opposed his son Shakyamuni's desire to renounce the secular world and lead a religious life, but when Shakyamuni returned to his home Kapilavastu after his awakening, Shuddhodana converted to his teachings.

³² This passage is followed by the explanation: "[A Sutra] explains the essence of filial piety: 'By renouncing one's obligations and entering the Buddhist life one can truly repay those obligations in full.' That is, in order to enter the true way, one leaves one's home against one's parents' wishes and attains Buddhahood. Then one can truly repay one's debt of gratitude to them" (WND-1, 499).

and compassion—sometimes gently and patiently, sometimes strictly and directly.

A teacher or mentor in the realm of Buddhism is one who has battled and triumphed over devilish functions. Disciples, meanwhile, learn the essentials of faith from the mentor so that they can begin to do the same. Buddhism as a teaching of the shared commitment of mentor and disciple is only complete when disciples respond to the mentor's teaching and spur themselves to take action.

Wanting to see the Ikegami brothers win over the obstacle confronting them, the Daishonin proceeds to relate at length a number of pertinent historical anecdotes and tales. First of all, he cites the story of Po I and Shu Ch'i,³³ who since ancient times have been held up in the East as exemplars of filial virtue (cf. WND-1, 498–99). Next, referring to how both Shakyamuni and the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai³⁴ faced some form of obstruction from their parents as well, he underscores the Buddhist teaching that one must not give in to the wishes of a parent aimed at hindering one's practice (cf. WND-1, 499). Further, citing stories relating to the two Japanese imperial princes Nintoku and Uji,³⁵ the two brothers Pure Storehouse and Pure Eye³⁶ who appear in the Lotus Sutra, and a hermit and his assistant³⁷ in ancient India, the Daishonin repeatedly stresses the need for the Ikegami brothers to unite in spirit (cf. WND-1, 499).

Of these many examples, the story of Shakyamuni leaving home to pursue a religious life against his father King Shuddhodana's wishes carries an especially important message for the Ikegami brothers who were in the agonizing position of having to choose between faith or filial duty.

Faith and filial devotion are normally not in opposition, so there's no need to choose one at the expense of the other. In fact, the Daishonin's Buddhism teaches the importance of filial devotion—being a good son or daughter to one's parents—and,

³³ Po I and Shu Ch'i: Brothers of ancient China known for their wisdom. Sons of the ruler Ku-chu. Their father had named the younger brother Shu Ch'i as his successor. But after Ku-chu passed away, Shu Ch'i refused to ascend the throne, not wanting to pass over his elder sibling.

³⁴ T'ien-t'ai (538–597): Also known as Chih-i. The founder of the T'ien-t'ai school in China. His lectures were compiled in such works as *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*, *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*, and *Great Concentration and Insight*. He spread the Lotus Sutra in China, and established the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life. In "Letter to the Brothers," the Daishonin refers to the time when T'ien-t'ai was engaging in meditation on the Lotus Sutra, and devilish functions sought to obstruct him by appearing in the form of his deceased parents.

³⁵ Prince Nintoku and Prince Uji were the sons of Emperor Ojin (late 4th–early 5th century).

³⁶ Pure Storehouse and Pure Eye: The two sons of King Wonderful Adornment who appear in the "King Wonderful Adornment" (27th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra. Their father was a devout believer in non-Buddhist teachings, but they awakened him to the greatness of Buddhism by displaying supernatural powers.

³⁷ The hermit had ordered his assistant to stand guard so that he might awaken to the Law, but the latter failed in this task.

indeed, also clarifies what filial devotion really means.

The Daishonin writes: “In all worldly affairs, it is the son’s duty to obey his parents, yet on the path to Buddhahood, disobeying one’s parents ultimately constitutes filial piety” (WND-1, 499). In this context, our attaining Buddhahood becomes the supreme expression of filial devotion. He further states: “Not only will they [those who hear the Lotus Sutra] themselves attain Buddhahood, but also their fathers and mothers will attain Buddhahood in their present forms” (WND-2, 744).

Some of our members are also striving earnestly in their Buddhist practice and activities for kosen-rufu without the support or understanding of their parents. But there is no need to fret or be impatient, or to try to force Buddhism on them. As long as just one person in a family is practicing sincerely, then the whole family is assured of enjoying lasting success and prosperity through that one person’s pervasive influence.

In an article titled “Precepts for Youth,” Mr. Toda wrote:

Our struggle is one that requires that we develop compassion for all living beings. Yet there are so many young people who are incapable of having compassion for their own parents. How can they be expected to care about perfect strangers? The effort to overcome the coldness and indifference in our own lives and attain the same state of compassion as the Buddha is the essence of human revolution.³⁸

Unless we have the spirit to treasure our own parents, we can neither achieve our human revolution nor transform society. I fully share these sentiments of my mentor.

As he recounts the different anecdotes, the Daishonin pauses to praise the Ikegami brothers for uniting despite their father’s attempts to divide them, saying: “Could there ever be a more wonderful story than your own?” (WND-1, 499). In other words, he is saying that their story will live on with unrivaled brilliance into the future.

Similarly, the lives of all those who stood up resolutely as the Daishonin’s disciples and enacted powerful dramas of faith in which they triumphed over devilish functions are also “wonderful stories” that will endure into future generations. Indeed, the experience of the Ikegami brothers who, through unity and perseverance in faith, not only overcame two instances of disownment but were eventually even able to lead their father to faith in the Daishonin’s Buddhism has been a source of immeasurable hope for people of later times. Likewise, no one can imagine what an incredible source

³⁸ *Toda Josei Zenshu*, vol. 1, p. 60.

of inspiration the diverse experiences in faith of our members today will be for those of future generations. Each person leaving behind stories of victory—this is the purpose of the path of mentor and disciple.

We cannot defeat devilish functions if we allow ourselves to be ruled by ego. The way to build a solid and unshakable self is to stand up with the same spirit and commitment as the teacher or leader of kosen-rufu. Those who can find this supreme path of happiness within the depths of their lives will never be defeated.

The American poet Walt Whitman (1819–92) writes in his “Song of the Open Road”:

Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-fortune,

.....

The earth, that is sufficient,

I do not want the constellations any nearer³⁹

There is no need to try and capture distant stars from the sky, for the source of all victory lies within.

Mr. Toda once said to me:

Daisaku, don’t be deterred by insults and criticisms that resound like the din of yapping dogs. Don’t let yourself be swayed by anything so trivial. Walk the path of heroes. Walk the path of the great. What we’re undergoing now is but a tiny fraction of the obstacles encountered by the Daishonin, whose teachings we uphold.

I have striven for more than 60 years with this determination. Great hardships are the badge of honor of those who walk the noble path of mentor and disciple. It is now my hope that many youthful successors will continue along this great path of Soka.

(Translated from the May 2009 issue of the *Daibyakurenge*, the Soka Gakkai study journal)

³⁹ Walt Whitman, “Song of the Open Road,” *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Everyman’s Library, 1968), p. 125.