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

[...]

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)

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.¹ 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”² (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—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. [...]

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.

¹ Buddha nature: The internal cause or potential for attaining Buddhahood.

² 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).

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. [...]

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

[...] 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":

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. [...]

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,³ as well as the warriors under Masakado and Sadato,⁴ 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”

[...] 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

³ 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.

⁴ 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.

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. [...]

When the Thus Come One Shakyamuni was a prince, his father, King Shuddhodana,⁵ 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.⁶ (WND-1, 499)

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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

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

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, 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. [...]

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).

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 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. [...]