

SGI President Ikeda's Study Lecture Series

LEARNING FROM THE GOSHO: THE HOPE-FILLED WRITINGS OF NICHIREN DAISHONIN

[9] "Lessening One's Karmic Retribution"

Action Is the Soul of Genuine Practitioners of Nichiren Buddhism —Transforming One's Karma and Helping Others Do the Same¹

The Nirvana Sutra teaches the principle of lessening one's karmic retribution. If one's heavy karma from the past is not expiated within this lifetime, one must undergo the sufferings of hell in the future, but if one experiences extreme hardship in this life [because of the Lotus Sutra], the sufferings of hell will vanish instantly. And when one dies, one will obtain the blessings of the human and heavenly worlds [the worlds of Humanity and Heaven], as well as those of the three vehicles [the worlds of Learning, Realization, and Bodhisattva] and the one vehicle [the world of Buddhahood]. Bodhisattva Never Disparaging was not abused and vilified, stoned and beaten with staves without reason. He had probably slandered the correct teaching in the past. The phrase "when his offenses had been wiped out" [LS20, 270] indicates that, because Bodhisattva Never Disparaging met persecution, he was able to eradicate his offenses from previous lifetimes. (This concludes my first point.) (WND-1, 199)

One may be letter-perfect in reciting the Lotus Sutra, but it is far more difficult to act as it teaches. The "Simile and Parable" chapter states, "If this person . . . on seeing those who read, recite, copy, and uphold this sutra, should despise, hate, envy, or bear grudges against them . . ." The "Teacher of the Law" chapter reads, "Since hatred and jealousy toward this sutra abound even when the Thus Come One is in the world, how much more will this be so after his passing?" The "Encouraging Devotion" chapter reads, "Many ignorant people will attack us with swords and staves . . . again and again we will be banished." The "Peaceful Practices" chapter states, "It [the Lotus Sutra] will face much hostility in the world and be difficult to believe."

¹ SGI Newsletter 7595.

Although these quotations from the sutra are the Buddha's prophecies, there is no reference to when these persecutions will occur. In the past, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging and the monk Realization of Virtue read and lived these passages. But setting aside the two thousand years of the Former and Middle Days of the Law, now, in the Latter Day, in all Japan only Nichiren seems to be doing so. From the present situation, I can well imagine how followers, relatives, disciples, and lay supporters must have grieved in the past when during the reigns of evil kings so many of their sage monks met persecution.

Nichiren has now read [and lived] the entirety of the Lotus Sutra. Even a single phrase or verse assures one's enlightenment; since I have read the entire sutra, how much more certain is my enlightenment. I am more confident than ever. Though I may sound presumptuous, my most fervent wish is to realize the security and peace of the entire land. In an age when none will heed me, however, it is beyond my power. I will close now to keep this brief. (WND-1, 199–200)

Lecture

This year marks the 200th anniversary of the first performance of Beethoven's² famous Fifth Symphony, "Fate," in Vienna. This symphony's first movement opens with the well-known, four-note "fate" motif. According to some, the German composer described the intention behind this motif as "Fate knocking at the door!"³

Beethoven was 38 when he debuted this work. Faced with encroaching deafness from his late 20s on, he was plunged into such depths of loneliness and despair that he even contemplated taking his life. This symphony is the fruit of his ultimate triumph over adversity, and it continues to inspire people around the world to stand up and confront their destiny or karma. The power of the human spirit is infinite. No matter what fate might have in store for us, we can definitely overcome it. We can break through our sufferings and find joy.

In my youth, I would often play records of Beethoven's music in my small apartment. I used to listen to the Fifth Symphony during that most trying period in 1950, when I took on the business crisis facing my mentor and strove to support him in every way possible. I'll never forget how each time I heard the opening strains, I was stirred and encouraged by the vigor of life that abounds in the music.

² Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827): German composer. Active in Vienna during the transitional period between Classical and Romantic eras in Western classical music. Despite suffering from hearing loss, Beethoven composed many masterpieces, including nine symphonies.

³ Anton Felix Schindler, *Beethoven as I Knew Him*, edited by Donald MacArdle and translated by Constance S. Jolly (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), n.p.

The Bodhisattva Way of Life

Beethoven declared: “My art shall be exhibited only in the service of the poor.”⁴ To struggle with one’s own destiny or karma while at the same time striving to impart courage to others so that they can challenge and triumph over their own destiny or karma—this calls to mind the bodhisattva way of life. A bodhisattva firmly believes that there is no hardship or suffering that cannot be surmounted.

The doctrine of changing karma taught in Nichiren Buddhism is an unrivaled principle of victory in life, bringing hope, courage, and confidence to all people. It embodies a philosophy of supreme humanism showing that each individual inherently possesses the power to weather any destiny or karma. It also constitutes a tenet of unsurpassed respect for the sanctity of life, revealing the fundamental causality of life by which we can actually tap and manifest this power. In short, it represents a hope-filled teaching for all humanity, illuminating as it does the latent power innate in each person’s life.

In this installment, we will study “Lessening One’s Karmic Retribution.” This is a letter that Nichiren Daishonin composed in October 1271, right in the midst of the tumultuous period following the Tatsunokuchi Persecution and leading up the Sado Exile.⁵ Why was he destined to encounter such great persecutions? This letter clarifies the significance of hardships and obstacles faced by practitioners of the Lotus Sutra, and in the process explains the principle of changing one’s karma or karma that is the foundation of the Daishonin’s Buddhism.

Let us study this important writing with the intent of learning from the Daishonin’s lofty spirit.

The Nirvana Sutra teaches the principle of lessening one’s karmic retribution. If one’s heavy karma from the past is not expiated within this lifetime, one must undergo the sufferings of hell in the future, but if one experiences extreme hardship in this life [because of the Lotus Sutra], the sufferings of hell will vanish instantly. And when one dies, one will obtain the blessings of the human and heavenly worlds [the worlds of Humanity and Heaven], as well as those of the three vehicles [the worlds of Learning,

⁴ Ludwig van Beethoven, *Beethoven: Letters, Journals and Conversations*, edited and translated by Michael Hamburger (London: Thames and Hudson, 1951), p. 40.

⁵ Tatsunokuchi Persecution and Sado Exile: On September 12, 1271, the authorities arrested Nichiren Daishonin and took him to a place called Tatsunokuchi on the outskirts of Kamakura, where they tried to execute him under cover of darkness. When the execution attempt failed, he was held in detention at the residence of the deputy constable of Sado, Homma Rokuro Saemon, in Echi (present-day Kanagawa Prefecture). After a period of about a month while the government debated what to do with him, he was exiled to Sado Island, which was tantamount to a death sentence. However, when the Daishonin’s predictions of internal strife and foreign invasion were fulfilled, the government issued a pardon in March 1274, and the Daishonin returned to Kamakura.

Realization, and Bodhisattva] and the one vehicle [the world of Buddhahood]. (WND-1, 199)

Great Hardships Lead to the Attainment of Buddhahood

In this writing, we can see the Daishonin's towering life-state of viewing great hardships as an opportunity to attain Buddhahood. He clarifies the common truth of Buddhism and human existence that hardships are a part of life, saying that we should not be perturbed by them. His spirit is expressed in the words: "Difficulties will arise, and these are to be looked on as [peace and comfort]" (cf. OTT, 115).

In another writing, the Daishonin also states that if one were to give one's life for the Lotus Sutra or suffer persecution on account of the daimoku [Nam-myoho-renge-kyo], then the life that one discards and the adversities one encounters will all serve to enable one to attain Buddhahood (cf. WND-1, 196). And elsewhere, he says: "It seems to me that on the path to attain Buddhahood it may invariably be when one has done something like lay down one's life that one becomes a Buddha" (WND-1, 202).

Encountering great hardships for the sake of the Lotus Sutra is the path that leads directly to attaining Buddhahood. Therefore, there is nothing to fear. There is no greater cause for joy. This was no doubt the Daishonin's state of mind following the Tatsunokuchi Persecution.

For approximately one month after his near execution at Tatsunokuchi on September 12, 1271, until his departure for Sado Island on October 10 of the same year, the Daishonin was held in custody at the residence of the deputy constable of Sado, Homma Rokuro Saemon,⁶ in Echi, Sagami Province (the present-day city of Atsugi in Kanagawa Prefecture, a short distance from Kamakura).

As reflected in his statement, "I survived even the Tatsunokuchi Persecution" (GZ, 843),⁷ the Daishonin manifested the life-state of a lion king who defeats all devilish forces and dedicates his life to the vow to lead all people to enlightenment. And he wrote many impassioned letters to his followers in such places as Kamakura and Shimosa Province (present-day Chiba Prefecture), encouraging them to stand up with the same spirit as he.

At that time, one or more followers in the Shimosa area rushed to see the Daishonin out of concern for his safety. This letter was composed in response to their sincere actions. Dated October 5, 1271, it is addressed to Ota Jomyo, Soya Kyoshin, and Dharma Bridge Kimbara.⁸

⁶ Homma Rokuro Saemon (n.d.): Deputy constable of Sado Island. He served under Hojo Nobutoki, a powerful figure who was constable of both Musashi Province and Sado Island. Homma had a fief and residence in Echi (present-day Kanagawa Prefecture).

⁷ "Okoku Kikigaki" (The Recorded Lectures); not translated in WND, vols. 1 and 2.

⁸ Ota Jomyo, Soya Kyoshin, and Dharma Bridge Kimbara (also pronounced Kanahara) were all followers of Nichiren Daishonin who resided in Shimosa Province. "Dharma Bridge" was a title established in the mid-9th century as an official rank for priests, but later it simply became a title of honor.

At the outset, the Daishonin refers to an episode involving two brothers, followers of Shakyamuni Buddha, who—depending on the source used—were both individually named Chudapanthaka or were together referred to as Chudapanthaka.⁹ Either way, when one was called, both would answer. The Daishonin says that whenever one of his three followers—Ota, Soya, and Kimbara—came to visit, he felt as if he were in the company of all three.

It is not clear whether the trio actually went to Echi together, or whether just one of them went as a representative. From the way the letter opens, however, it seems likely that only one of them traveled there. This probably also makes sense given that it wouldn't have been easy to meet the Daishonin while he was in custody. Even supposing that all three had in fact gone to visit him, he would not have been able to talk to them freely or for any length. This may also be a reason why the letter is addressed to all three.

In any event, as we can see from the content of this letter, the Daishonin seeks to urge his followers to unite together solidly at this critical time, to advance together in the spirit of “many in body, one in mind.”

The Significance of Hardships

In “Lessening One's Karmic Retribution,” the Daishonin explains from three perspectives the significance of the great hardships encountered by him and his followers.

First, he presents the principle of lessening one's karmic retribution, pointing out that the current momentous persecutions they are undergoing represent an excellent opportunity to transform their destiny or karma.

Second, he cites examples from the past to clarify that those who spread the correct teaching of Buddhism will inevitably experience persecution (WND-1, 199).¹⁰ Referring to Shakyamuni and a number of his so-called 24 successors,¹¹ the Daishonin explains that even practitioners in the Former Day of the Law in India, who carried out shakubuku when it was necessitated by the times and locality they found themselves in, were beset with persecution. He then anticipates that the difficulties he will have to face will be all the

⁹ Accounts vary considerably according to the source, which include such Buddhist scriptures as the Increasing by One Agama Sutra and the Stories of the Words of Truth Sutra.

¹⁰ The Daishonin writes: “The twenty-five teachers who transmitted the Buddhist teachings [i.e., Shakyamuni and his twenty-four successors of the Former Day of the Law], with the exception of Shakyamuni Buddha, were all temporary manifestations of Buddhas or great bodhisattvas whose advent had been predicted by Shakyamuni. Of these, the fourteenth, Bodhisattva Aryadeva, was killed by a non-Buddhist, and the twenty-fifth, the Venerable Aryasimha, was beheaded by King Dammira. Buddhamitra and Bodhisattva Nagarjuna also suffered many persecutions. Yet others propagated Buddhism under the protection of devout kings, without encountering persecution. This would seem to be because good countries and evil countries exist in the world, and shoju and shakubuku exist [to be used respectively in these two types of countries] as ways of propagation. It was like this even during the Former and Middle Days of the Law, as it was in India, the center of Buddhism. This country [Japan] is far away from India, and this is the beginning of [the evil age of] the Latter Day of the Law. I was certain beforehand that such things would happen; I have simply been waiting for the inevitable” (WND-1, 199).

¹¹ Twenty-four successors: Also, twenty-four patriarchs. Those who, after Shakyamuni's death, successively inherited the lineage of his teachings and propagated them in India.

greater, for he is propagating the Lotus Sutra—the Buddha’s highest teaching—in Japan, a land far removed from the birthplace of Buddhism in India and where people disregard the correct teaching. Moreover, he was doing so at the start of the evil age of the Latter Day of the Law, a time when shakubuku (namely, refuting the erroneous and revealing the true) would be the only effective method of propagation.¹² Therefore, the Daishonin states that he had long been prepared to meet great hardships and had in fact been waiting for them to arrive.

Third, the Daishonin cites various sutra passages to indicate that his having come under harsh attack for propagating the Law signifies that he has read and lived the Lotus Sutra, suggesting that he himself is the votary of the Lotus Sutra in the Latter Day.

As this shows, throughout this writing, the Daishonin seeks above all to shed light on the significance of meeting with persecution as a practitioner of the Mystic Law. He also endeavors to answer the questions posed by his followers, who were wondering why they should face difficulties in the course of their practice. He would later discuss this point more thoroughly in his treatise, “The Opening of the Eyes.”

In the writing we are presently studying, the Daishonin refers to the principle of lessening one’s karmic retribution, and highlights the significance of hardships in terms of karma, a subject relevant to all people. In other words, the Daishonin uses his own example of overcoming persecution to explain the meaning of difficulties, which are universal to everyone. This letter can be seen as a reply to the fundamental question of why hardships are an inevitable part of human life.

The Daishonin’s point, simply put, boils down to this: “Difficulties will arise, and these are to be looked on as [peace and comfort]” (OTT, 115). It is when we have broken through an obstacle that we can savor a true sense of peace and ease. By contrast, such a state of being will forever elude those who shun difficulties and try to run away from challenges.

There is no such thing as a life that is free of hardships. We experience adversity precisely so that we can achieve true peace in life. But unless we are aware of our inner strength to withstand hardships, we will find ourselves in a situation where one difficulty gives rise to another, and we will ultimately be crushed by their weight. The Latter Day is a time when people’s lives are shrouded in darkness or ignorance,¹³ and destructive influences prevail. People are drawn into a downward spiral of negative causes and misery. Therefore, if we hope to guide people to happiness in the Latter Day of the Law, it is of utmost importance to teach them about the power they possess within to triumph over suffering. This is the teaching of the Daishonin’s Buddhism.

The principle of lessening one’s karmic retribution set forth in this writing explains the

¹² Shakubuku is one of two methods of teaching and propagating Buddhism, the other being shoju. Shakubuku means directly awakening people to the correct teaching by refuting their mistaken views, whereas shoju involves gradually leading others to the correct teaching without refuting their mistaken views. In general, shoju is to be employed during the Former and Middle Days of the Law, whereas shakubuku is to be used in the Latter Day.

¹³ Ignorance: In Buddhism, this means ignorance about the true nature of existence. It is deemed the fundamental cause of suffering and delusion. It prevents people from recognizing the true nature of their lives and taking faith in the Mystic Law, which enables all to attain enlightenment.

quintessential power that resides within us and enables us to withstand hardships. The Daishonin demonstrated this power by weathering intense persecutions himself.

Lessening One's Karmic Retribution Equals Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime

The principle of lessening one's karmic retribution appears in the Nirvana Sutra.¹⁴ The Chinese characters for this term literally mean "transforming the heavy and receiving it lightly." The prevailing view of karma in the Daishonin's time was that if a person had accumulated such heavy offenses in past lifetimes that it would be impossible to expiate all of their evil karma in the course of their present existence, they would have to undergo hellish sufferings in future lifetimes before their retribution could end. The principle of lessening karmic retribution that the Daishonin taught, however, held that a person could expiate even the heaviest negative karma from past lifetimes through receiving retribution in a lighter form in their present existence.

The theory of karma in Nichiren Buddhism is an empowering teaching that can revitalize people's lives. It teaches that there is no negative karma, no matter how heavy, that cannot be transformed for the better. In this writing, the Daishonin's doctrine of changing karma or destiny is discussed in terms of the principle of lessening one's karmic retribution. There are two major points concerning lessening one's karmic retribution that are highlighted in this writing.

The first point is in regard to the Daishonin's declaration that "the sufferings of hell will vanish instantly" (WND-1, 199). What he is saying is that even the kind of heavy karma that gives rise to hellish retribution can be expiated immediately, right now—not gradually at some distant time in the future. This is made possible by the principle of the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds.

Generally, karma is taught as being formed by past causes and manifested as present effects—that is, there is a time lag between cause and effect; they are not simultaneous. The Daishonin's Buddhism, however, teaches that karma can be transformed as a result of manifesting the Buddhahood that inherently exists within us. Just as the myriad stars in the sky disappear when the sun rises, the unfathomable store of negative karma in our lives can be erased when we bring forth the life-state of Buddhahood.

Accordingly, the second point—one that is very important—is that lessening karmic retribution is also the gateway to attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime. In this writing, the Daishonin states:

The sufferings of hell will vanish instantly. And when one dies, one will obtain the blessings of the human and heavenly worlds [the worlds of Humanity and Heaven], as well as those of the three vehicles [the worlds of Learning, Realization, and Bodhisattva] and the one vehicle [the world of Buddhahood]. (WND-1, 199)

¹⁴ Nirvana Sutra, vol. 29.

The “blessing of the one vehicle” constitutes the benefit of attaining Buddhahood.

Lessening one’s karmic retribution is not a simple settling of our karmic accounts; it implies a fundamental transformation of our lives, whereby we put a stop to the negative cycle of suffering and delusion and enter a new positive trajectory of happiness. When we do so, we can savor in lifetime after lifetime the blessings of the worlds of Humanity, Heaven, Learning, Realization, Bodhisattva, and Buddhahood.

In other words, lessening karmic retribution leads directly to the great path of attaining Buddhahood. In that sense, when we lessen our karmic retribution, it doesn’t mean merely zeroing out a minus balance, but rather that we effect a momentous change in the direction of our very lives, shifting from a downward descent toward an infinite upward ascent, from a negative path to a positive one of genuine good. This is the power of the Mystic Law, which has the ability to transform the negative into something beneficial—in other words, to turn poison into medicine.

The doctrine of lessening one’s karmic retribution in the Daishonin’s Buddhism is none other than the principle for redirecting our lives toward happiness right at this very moment—here, now, just as we are. Similarly, transforming our karma is none other than changing those inner life-tendencies that keep us trapped in negativity and unhappiness and solidly putting ourselves on a positive path.

Therefore, the present moment in which we wage this struggle is vitally important. In “The Opening of the Eyes,” the Daishonin cites the passage from the Contemplation on the Mind-Ground Sutra, which states: “If you want to understand the causes that existed in the past, look at the results as they are manifested in the present. And if you want to understand what results will be manifested in the future, look at the causes that exist in the present” (WND-1, 279). Our present is the result or effect of our past causes. At the same time, the present itself becomes the cause that will shape our future. The three existences—past, present, and future—are all contained in the present, in this instant. The important thing is how we change our attitude or inner resolve at this moment. This is because we can freely create our future through our determination and action right at this very instant.

The Daishonin’s teaching of changing karma opens the way for a brilliant revolution of hope, freeing people from the predominant dark, fatalistic view of karma or destiny.

Bodhisattva Never Disparaging was not abused and vilified, stoned and beaten with staves without reason. He had probably slandered the correct teaching in the past. The phrase “when his offenses had been wiped out” [LS20, 270] indicates that, because Bodhisattva Never Disparaging met persecution, he was able to eradicate his offenses from previous lifetimes. (This concludes my first point.) (WND-1, 199)

The Benefit of the Purification of the Six Sense Organs

Next, Nichiren Daishonin cites the example of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, who appears in the Lotus Sutra's "Never Disparaging" (20th) chapter, which is named after him. The Daishonin asserts that the words "when his offenses had been wiped out" (LS20, 270) indicate the principle of lessening one's karmic retribution and changing one's karma.

Bodhisattva Never Disparaging showed unwavering respect toward everyone he met, bowing to them in veneration while ceaselessly trying to communicate the fundamental tenet of the Lotus Sutra that all living beings possess the Buddha nature. For his efforts, however, he was abused and vilified, stoned and beaten with staves by the arrogant monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen. Yet he remained undaunted by such persecution and continued to treat all people with respect. He ultimately gained the benefit of the purification of the six sense organs and attained Buddhahood.

Though Bodhisattva Never Disparaging encountered hardships as a result of practicing the correct teaching, by triumphing over those difficulties and continuing in his practice, he obtained the benefit of eradicating the slander of the Law that he had committed in past lifetimes. This, the Daishonin states, is the meaning of the phrase "when his offenses had been wiped out."

What kind of benefits, then, did Bodhisattva Never Disparaging receive "when his offenses had been wiped out"? As one benefit in his present lifetime, he attained the vibrant life-force that is the hallmark of the purification of the six sense organs. This is said to have enabled him to perfectly understand the essence of the Lotus Sutra, and he was later reborn as Shakyamuni Buddha. In other words, he did not merely transform his life in his current existence, but he achieved the indestructible life-state of Buddhahood that would endure into the eternal future.

The "Benefits of the Teacher of the Law" (19th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra outlines in detail the benefit of the purification for each of the six sense organs— namely, our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body (skin), and mind.

For example, "eye benefits" are described as follows. As a result of upholding and practicing the Lotus Sutra, our eyes, just as they are, gain the ability to view all that exists in the thousand-millionfold world,¹⁵ including the great seas and Mount Sumeru. And even though we do not possess heavenly or divine eyes, we can see all living beings down as far as the world of hell and up to the summit of the world of heavenly beings and also apprehend all their karmic causes and conditions and the results or effects that await them (LS19, 251–52).

In other words, we can understand the thousand-millionfold world and clearly see the

¹⁵ Thousand-millionfold world: Also, major world system: One of the world systems described in ancient Indian cosmology. A world consists of a Mount Sumeru, its surrounding seas and mountain ranges, a sun, a moon, and other heavenly bodies. This concept might be compared in modern terms to that of a solar system from the standpoint of the planet one inhabits. One major world system comprises one billion worlds, and hence it is referred to as the thousand-millionfold world. The universe was conceived of as containing countless major world systems.

essence of the lives of ourselves and others, as if they were reflected in a clear mirror. When our eyes are purified—that is to say, when we see with the undistorted eyes of the enlightened Dharma nature from which the impurities of ignorance have been cleansed—we can understand which causes lead to happiness and which ones lead to suffering and misery. This enables us to turn any state of life within the Ten Worlds—from Hell through to Buddhahood—into a wellspring of value creation.

The benefit of the purification of the six sense organs attained by Bodhisattva Never Disparaging is the vigorous life-force to withstand painful hardships. Bodhisattva Never Disparaging was persecuted because he lived in an evil age, but throughout the ordeals he encountered, he did not waver in his belief in the Lotus Sutra and its teaching that all living beings possess the Buddha nature. It could be said that through his struggle to triumph over adversity and protect the Law, he defeated the ignorance or darkness that is the fundamental source of negative karma, and gained the benefit of purifying his senses, which brought forth his innate life-force as an entity of the Mystic Law.

This is the benefit of transforming one's karma through dedicated efforts to uphold the Lotus Sutra.

The Benefit of Protecting the Law

Here, in connection with lessening one's karmic retribution, I would like to confirm the important significance of shakubuku—that is, the practice of clarifying the correct teaching of Buddhism and refuting slander of the Law.

In this writing, the Daishonin says it is only natural that he should encounter great persecution as a result of carrying out shakubuku in the remote land of Japan during the Latter Day of the Law. As I mentioned earlier, he says that he had been prepared for such an eventuality, and had been waiting for it to arise. In an evil age rampant with negative influences, the practice of shakubuku serves to protect the Law and as such becomes the driving force for lessening karmic retribution and transforming karma.

The Daishonin clearly states that by conducting shakubuku in the Latter Day, one can receive the benefit that accrues from protecting the Law—namely, that of lessening one's karmic retribution.¹⁶ For example, in “The Opening of the Eyes,” he writes:

When I vigorously berate those throughout the country who slander the Law, I meet with great difficulties. It must be that my actions in defending the Law in this present life are calling forth retributions for the grave offenses of my past. If iron does not come into contact with fire, it remains black, but if it contacts fire, it turns red. If you place a log across a swift stream, waves will pile up like hills. If you disturb a sleeping lion, it will roar loudly. (WND-1, 282)

¹⁶ In “The Opening of the Eyes,” the Daishonin also cites the Parinirvana Sutra, which states: “It is due to the blessings obtained by protecting the Law that they can diminish in this lifetime their suffering and retribution” (WND-1, 281).

The Latter Day of the Law is an age that abounds with negative influences and evil companions¹⁷ as well as widespread slander of the Lotus Sutra. These all combine to exacerbate people's fundamental ignorance and cause them to lose sight of the Buddha nature. Efforts to defend the Law, to protect the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, are therefore crucial, and ultimately necessitate our battling the destructive influence of slander of the Law pervading society.

In other words, even the countless negative causes from past lives that have brought us painful retribution in the present are all in essence the result of ignorance of and disbelief in the Mystic Law. Such ignorance and disbelief also lie at the root of all slander of the Law. Therefore, through the benefit we obtain from our efforts to protect the Law by defeating disbelief and slander, we can conquer the ignorance or darkness in our own lives. And when we do so, our innate vibrant life-force as an entity of the Mystic Law—that is, the dynamic life-force of Buddhahood—manifests, and we can erase sufferings that stem from accumulated negative karma.

The causality by which karma from past lives manifests in our present existence is what we term “general causality,” characterized by the non-simultaneity of cause and effect. In contrast, “simultaneous causality” indicates the causality by which we can reveal our Buddhahood—that is, vanquishing our ignorance in this present lifetime and immediately tapping the life-force of Buddhahood inherent within us. The former constitutes a “sequential change,” while the latter constitutes an “instantaneous change.”

While the foregoing is an explanation of the principle of transforming one's karma, this same principle is expressed as lessening one's karmic retribution when the focus is on the degree of hardships one experiences.

Efforts to protect the Law—which bring us the benefit of changing our karma—are invariably accompanied by hardships. If we persevere in such efforts, sternly rebuking slander of the Law, it is natural that we will face attack from forces that are hostile to the Lotus Sutra, and that great persecution will arise. Even Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, who propagated the guiding tenet of the Lotus Sutra, underwent persecution in the form of being stoned and beaten with staves. But even this can be regarded as no more than light suffering, compared to the heavy suffering he might otherwise have had to undergo as retribution for unfathomable offenses committed in past lifetimes. This principle is called lessening one's karmic retribution because, by experiencing minor suffering, we can expiate negative karma that ought to have brought far greater suffering.

¹⁷ Evil companion: Also, evil friend or evil teacher. One who causes others to fall into the evil paths by misleading them in connection with Buddhism. An evil companion deludes others with false teachings in order to obstruct their correct Buddhist practice.

One may be letter-perfect in reciting the Lotus Sutra, but it is far more difficult to act as it teaches. The “Simile and Parable” chapter states, “If this person . . . on seeing those who read, recite, copy, and uphold this sutra, should despise, hate, envy, or bear grudges against them . . .” The “Teacher of the Law” chapter reads, “Since hatred and jealousy toward this sutra abound even when the Thus Come One is in the world, how much more will this be so after his passing?” The “Encouraging Devotion” chapter reads, “Many ignorant people will attack us with swords and staves . . . again and again we will be banished.” The “Peaceful Practices” chapter states, “It [the Lotus Sutra] will face much hostility in the world and be difficult to believe.”

Although these quotations from the sutra are the Buddha’s prophecies, there is no reference to when these persecutions will occur. In the past, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging and the monk Realization of Virtue read and lived these passages. But setting aside the two thousand years of the Former and Middle Days of the Law, now, in the Latter Day, in all Japan only Nichiren seems to be doing so. From the present situation, I can well imagine how followers, relatives, disciples, and lay supporters must have grieved in the past when during the reigns of evil kings so many of their sage monks met persecution.

Nichiren has now read [and lived] the entirety of the Lotus Sutra. Even a single phrase or verse assures one’s enlightenment; since I have read the entire sutra, how much more certain is my enlightenment. I am more confident than ever. Though I may sound presumptuous, my most fervent wish is to realize the security and peace of the entire land. In an age when none will heed me, however, it is beyond my power. I will close now to keep this brief. (WND-1, 200)

Action Is the Direct Path to Changing Our Karma

This passage reveals that the Daishonin’s practice of shakubuku is what it means to read and live the Lotus Sutra.

In Buddhist practice, the important thing is that one’s words and actions are in harmony. In terms of the six stages of practice¹⁸ set forth by the Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai of China, genuine practice only begins at the stage of perception and action, when one’s words

¹⁸ Six stages of practice: Six stages in the practice of the Lotus Sutra formulated by T’ien-t’ai (538–597) in his *Great Concentration and Insight*. They are: (1) the stage of being a Buddha in theory, (2) the stage of hearing the name and words of the truth, (3) stage of perception and action, (4) the stage of resemblance to enlightenment, (5) the stage of progressive awakening, and (6) the stage of ultimate enlightenment.

and actions are in synch.¹⁹

Likewise, in the Daishonin's Buddhism, action is of key importance. In this writing, he points out that, while it is relatively easy to recite the Lotus Sutra with letter-perfect accuracy—a form of Buddhist practice that many in Japanese society of the day prided themselves on—it is very difficult to conduct oneself exactly as the sutra teaches.

In particular, the Daishonin cites four passages of the Lotus Sutra that he has read with his life. Each passage asserts that those who propagate the Lotus Sutra after the Buddha's passing in the evil age of the Latter Day of the Law are certain to incur enmity and hardship in society. Based on the fact that he has encountered just such obstacles, the Daishonin declares that he alone in the Latter Day has practiced in a way that completely accords with the sutra's predictions.

Further, he says that he can imagine how followers in the past must have grieved when Buddhist teachers who spread the correct teaching during the reigns of evil rulers met persecution. These are words that echo his concern for how his own disciples must have felt as they continued to fight valiantly alongside him despite the punishing onslaught of persecution by the authorities, culminating in the Tatsunokuchi Persecution and the impending Sado Exile.

But, as if to dispel these dark clouds, the Daishonin serenely declares that since he has lived the entirety of the Lotus Sutra, the wonderful benefit of enlightenment awaits him, and that he is more confident than ever. He also states that he is not propagating the correct teaching only for his own attainment of Buddhahood, but out of his wish to realize the security and peace of the entire land.

The Daishonin was waging a momentous struggle to open the path to attaining Buddhahood for all people of the Latter Day of the Law. It was also an unprecedented struggle to transform the destiny or karma of the land and, further, to transform the destiny or karma of all humankind. This is the Daishonin's spirit. From this, it becomes clear that only the Daishonin can be considered as the true votary of the Lotus Sutra and the fundamental teacher who, with profound insight into the underlying nature of life, selflessly strove to open the path for transforming destiny or karma to actualize happiness for all people and secure a peaceful world.

Hoping to reassure his followers, the Daishonin seeks to convey to them his profound state of mind by describing his tangible efforts to read and live the Lotus Sutra. He calls out to them in effect: "Follow me with confidence!"

It goes without saying that, in the present defiled age of the Latter Day, only the Soka Gakkai—the organization carrying out the Buddha's decree—has inherited the Daishonin's spirit and undergone persecution for the sake of kosen-rufu exactly as described in the Lotus Sutra and the Goshō.

The Soka Gakkai's first and second presidents, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda,

¹⁹ Stage of perception and action: This is the third stage of practice where one rejoices upon hearing the teaching of the Mystic Law, and then correctly practices the Lotus Sutra, one's words matching one's actions. In "Lessening One's Karmic Retribution," the Daishonin cites the words of T'ien-t'ai's *Great Concentration and*

were the modern-day teachers who, recognizing this noble mission of the Soka Gakkai, boldly embarked on the widespread propagation of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

A woman once asked Mr. Toda why he was ill. He answered: "My being sick like this is a huge instance of lessening karmic retribution. Because of this illness, the immense difficulties that the Gakkai would have had to face are being reduced."

I cannot forget Mr. Toda's profound spirit. Day in and day out, he really threw himself into the turbulent maelstrom of obstacles and devilish functions pervading the universe and exercised the leadership of a lion king.

As President Toda's true disciple, I have made steadfast efforts to protect the Law, thereby opening the eternal path by which our members can transform their karma.

At the time of the Osaka Incident,²⁰ when I rose up to bear the full brunt of attacks on our organization, Mr. Toda told me: "When you take the lead and challenge great hardships, then, in accord with the principle of consistency from beginning to end,²¹ you will open the way to the attainment of Buddhahood in this lifetime not only for yourself but for all your fellow members."

Today, there are countless members around the globe, in a total of 192 countries and territories, who are advancing with confidence, pride, and joy along the supreme path of transforming karma into mission, and who have shown victorious actual proof of changing poison into medicine through faith. I believe that there is no greater testament to the principle of lessening karmic retribution.

In this writing, the Daishonin describes with irrepressible vigor his unshakable confidence and his immense struggles as the votary of the Lotus Sutra. To me, each word and phrase seems to pulse with his passionate spirit, calling out to us: "Become strong like Nichiren!" "Win together with Nichiren!"

As members of the SGI, we dedicate ourselves to kosen-rufu and strive wholeheartedly to help others change their karma, while grappling head-on with our own karma. The Daishonin's spirit lives in such noble actions, and such actions themselves enable us to live as lion kings overflowing with unsurpassed happiness and fulfillment.

"Together, let's press onward to kosen-rufu"—so goes a line from the refrain of a well-loved Gakkai song.²² All of you, the infinitely precious members of the SGI, are challenging yourselves earnestly day in and day out to transform your own karma and guide others to do the same. The heavenly deities cannot fail to rejoice and to protect you. Nichiren Daishonin would surely applaud you. And Mr. Makiguchi and Mr. Toda would also smilingly commend you.

Insight, saying that this stage means that "one acts as one speaks and speaks as one acts" (WND-1, 199).

²⁰ Osaka Incident: The occasion when SGI President Ikeda, then Soka Gakkai youth division chief of staff, was arrested and wrongfully charged with election law violations in a House of Councilor's by-election in Osaka in 1957. At the end of the court case, which dragged on for almost five years, he was fully exonerated of all charges.

²¹ Consistency from beginning to end: One of the ten factors of life listed in the "Expedient Means" (2nd) chapter of the Lotus Sutra. It indicates that all nine factors from "appearance" to "manifest effect" consistently and harmoniously express the same condition of existence at any given moment.

²² From the Soka Gakkai song, "Kofu ni Hashire" (Onward to Kosen-rufu).