

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)

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¹ SGI Newsletter 7595.

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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)

(...) 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.² 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. (...)

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² 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.

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)

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). (...)

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. (...)

As reflected in his statement, "I survived even the Tatsunokuchi Persecution" (GZ, 843),³ 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. (...) 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.⁴

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).⁵ (...)

³ "Okō Kikigaki" (The Recorded Lectures); not translated in WND, vols. 1 and 2.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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

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. (...)

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 principle of lessening one's karmic retribution appears in the Nirvana Sutra.⁶ 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. (...)

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. (...) 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

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).

⁶ Nirvana Sutra, vol. 29.

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)

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. (...)

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. (...) 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. (...) This is because we can freely create our future through our determination and action right at this very instant. (...)

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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. (...) 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”? (...) 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. (...)

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.”

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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. (...) 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 (...) 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. (...)

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 Gosho. The Soka Gakkai's first and second presidents, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda, 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. (...)

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. (...)