

LEARNING FROM THE WRITINGS OF NICHIREN DAISHONIN: THE TEACHINGS FOR VICTORY

“General Stone Tiger”

Strengthening Our Faith and Forging Our Life—The Great Path of Human Revolution¹

(...) Mr. Toda taught us that human revolution means being aware of our fundamental purpose in life and having absolute conviction in faith. He also explained that it means transforming our life from a condition dominated by the three poisons of greed, anger, and foolishness² to one manifesting the worlds of Bodhisattva and Buddhahood. This is the process of overcoming all devilish functions, and awakening and summoning forth the noble potential inherent in our life. It is building a strong self. That is why we who are engaged in the challenge of human revolution on a daily basis are always able to draw forth from within us the power to break through any deadlock. (...)

In this installment, let us study the Daishonin's writing “General Stone Tiger” to learn more about the essence of faith for achieving human revolution.

A Disciple Supporting His Mentor amid Personal Adversity

“General Stone Tiger” was written on October 22, 1278, and sent to Shijo Kingo in Kamakura by the Daishonin, who was residing on Mount Minobu. There are two points concerning its background that I would like to confirm.

First, from the previous year (1277), there had been widespread epidemics and a prolonged drought that had resulted in drastic food shortages. In addition, the Daishonin himself had been suffering from ill-health since the end of that year. (...)

Second, there had been a dramatic change in Shijo Kingo's circumstances as well. In 1277, Shijo Kingo had become ensnared in a plot by Ryokan of Gokuraku-ji temple and others on the occasion of the Kuwagayatsu Debate.³ This involved some of his fellow samurai making false accusations against him to his lord in an attempt to discredit him. Lord Ema, believing

¹ SGI Newsletter 8665.

² Three poisons of greed, anger, and foolishness: The fundamental evils inherent in life that give rise to human suffering. In Nagarjuna's *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, the three poisons are regarded as the source of all illusions and earthly desires. The three poisons are so called because they pollute people's lives and work to prevent them from turning their hearts and minds to goodness.

³ Kuwagayatsu Debate: A debate held in Kuwagayatsu, Kamakura, in 1277, between the Daishonin's disciple Sammi-bo and a priest named Ryuzo-bo, who was under the patronage of Ryokan of Gokuraku-ji temple. Ryuzo-bo was thoroughly defeated by Sammi-bo. Shijo Kingo merely attended the debate as an observer, and did not utter a word. However, it was alleged to Lord Ema that Shijo Kingo had burst into the debate with a number of confederates with weapons drawn and disrupted the proceedings.

these claims, was angered, and Kingo found himself threatened with the direst fate for a samurai: the loss of his status as a retainer. But, following the advice of the Daishonin, Shijo Kingo continued to faithfully serve Lord Ema, with the result that Lord Ema not only recognized his sincerity but even presented him with three new estates.⁴ At the same time, however, this demonstration of Lord Ema's favor fueled the jealousy of Shijo Kingo's rivals, placing him in even greater danger than before.

It was against this background that Shijo Kingo sent a letter and offerings from Kamakura to the Daishonin on Mount Minobu. The Daishonin lists the offerings that Shijo Kingo had forwarded from his estate in Shinano Province (present-day Nagano Prefecture). "General Stone Tiger" is a reply to Shijo Kingo's sincere letter. (...)

I am not as healthy as others,⁵ and in addition, I dwell in this remote mountain forest [of Minobu]. This year was especially difficult, with widespread epidemics and famine in spring and summer, which worsened in autumn and winter. My sickness grew worse again, too, but you gave me various medicines and a quilted robe. Thanks to your remedies, I improved steadily; I have now recovered and feel much better than before. *The Treatise on the Stages of Yoga Practice* by Bodhisattva Maitreya and *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* by Bodhisattva Nagarjuna both state that, if one's illness is caused by fixed karma, even excellent medicine will turn to poison, but that, if one believes in the Lotus Sutra [the Mystic Law], poison will change into medicine. Although unworthy, I propagate the Lotus Sutra; hence heavenly devils have competed to deprive me of food. Understanding this, I have no complaint, but I believe that I survived this time only because Shakyamuni Buddha entered your body to help me. (WND-1, 952)

⁴ The Daishonin writes: "You say that your new domains occupy an area three times the size of Tono'oka [in Shinano Province]. There is a man from the province of Sado staying here now who knows that area well. He tells me that, of the three villages, the one called Ikada is best. Although its fields and paddies are few, its profits are immeasurable. Two sites each yield an annual harvest worth one million coins in land tax; another site, three hundred thousand coins. Such, he says, are their merits" (WND-1, 945).

⁵ The original Japanese text here can be translated literally as "My situation is distinct from others." There are differing views as to which situation this refers to. One view is that it refers to the Daishonin's poor health, while another is that it refers to his being regarded as a dangerous and disruptive influence by the ruling authorities of the day.

(...) In the Daishonin's own arduous struggle for kosen-rufu—which saw him living in harsh conditions during his two-and-a-half-year exile on Sado Island and then his residence at Mount Minobu—the Daishonin's health was no doubt seriously compromised. (...)

While struggling with sickness as an ordinary mortal person, the Daishonin continues to give his entire being to encouraging his disciples. Through his personal example of recovering from illness, he demonstrates the great beneficial power of faith in the Mystic Law, which can “change poison into medicine”⁶ and thus even prolong one's life span, which was regarded as “fixed karma.”⁷(...)

Kosen-rufu is a battle between the forces of the Buddha and the devilish functions that pervade the universe. Faith in the Mystic Law enables us to vanquish the devils of illness and death. That is why the Daishonin describes the medical care given to him by Shijo Kingo—whose actions served to protect the votary of the Lotus Sutra—as the workings of Shakyamuni Buddha, and clarifies the principle for triumphing over all obstacles and negative functions without fail. (...)

So much for that. I was extremely concerned about your journey home last time, and I am overjoyed to hear that you have arrived safely in Kamakura. Such was my anxiety that I asked everyone who came here from Kamakura about you. One said that he had met you at Yumoto, another that he had encountered you farther on at Kozu, and when a third told me that he had seen you in Kamakura, I felt greatly relieved. From now on, you must not come to visit me in person unless absolutely necessary. When you have something urgent to tell me, send a messenger. Indeed, I was deeply worried about your last trip. An enemy will try to make you forget the danger so that he can attack. If you should have to travel, do not begrudge the cost of a horse. Make sure that you ride a good horse. Bring along your best men to defend you against a surprise attack, and ride a horse that can

⁶ 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 Mystic Law. This phrase is found in a passage from Nagarjuna's *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, which mentions “a great physician who can change poison into medicine.” This phrase is often cited to show that any problem or suffering can be transformed eventually into the greatest happiness and fulfillment in life.

⁷ Fixed karma: Also, immutable karma. The opposite of unfixed karma. Karma that inevitably produces a fixed or set result, whether negative or positive. Fixed karma may also be interpreted as karma whose effects are destined to appear at a fixed time. It was held that one's life span was fixed as retribution for karma.

easily carry you in your armor. (WND-1, 952–53)

Vigilance Is the Key to Victory

(...) As members of the SGI, you all possess a noble mission for kosen-rufu. Please don't cut corners as far as safety is concerned, but always remain alert to the slightest forewarnings of danger or mishap. Bring every activity to a safe and successful completion. But if someone should meet with an accident, then please warmly encourage them.(...)

My wife and I are always chanting earnestly for the safety and well-being of all our members. Each of you is a precious follower of the Buddha, so remind one another to be careful and vow to keep devilish influences out of your way.(...)

In the eighth volume of [the Great Teacher T'ien-tai's] *Great Concentration and Insight* and in the eighth volume of [the Great Teacher Miao-lo's] *The Annotations on "Great Concentration and Insight"* it says, "The stronger one's faith, the greater the protection of the gods." This means that the protection of the gods depends on the strength of one's faith. The Lotus Sutra is a fine sword, but its might depends on the one who wields it. (WND-1, 953)

The heavenly deities will definitely protect the practitioners of the Lotus Sutra, who uphold and propagate the sutra in the Latter Day of the Law. The Buddhas and bodhisattvas will praise such individuals, and the gods of the sun and moon will light their way before and behind.

But it is the individual's faith that activates these protective functions of the universe. The realization of our prayers depends on our wholehearted effort and earnest determination. This, indeed, is the lesson to be found in the Great Teacher Miao-lo's words, "The stronger one's faith, the greater the protection of the gods" (WND-1, 953). Strong faith, strong resolve, is the key to victory. The power brought forth from the mighty sword of the Lotus Sutra hinges on the faith of the person who wields it.(...)

"Treasures of the heart" are something that we slowly accumulate over time. Our steady efforts each day to polish our lives and strengthen our faith and resolve are the means by which we can build an unshakable state of life in which we "enjoy ourselves at ease" (cf. LSOC16, 272 [LS16, 230]).

Faith resides in our ongoing human revolution. The purpose of Buddhist practice is to realize our full potential as a human being. That's why the Daishonin urged his beloved disciple Shijo Kingo to live out his life as a person of wisdom and a model for other followers. In addition, he instructed him to overcome the very real problems he encountered in his life through his Buddhist practice.(...)

"It Is the Heart That Is Important"

As the Daishonin teaches, "It is the heart that is important." It is no exaggeration to say that victory or defeat in life depends upon whether one's heart, one's resolve, is strong and steadfast.

Speaking of individuals with strong resolve, I have engaged in a dialogue with Aurelio Peccei (1908–84), the cofounder and first president of the global think tank, the Club of Rome. Behind Dr. Peccei's warm smile was a man of indomitable conviction.

Dr. Peccei was a hero of the Italian antifascist resistance. He was arrested by the fascist militia in February 1944 and spent almost a year behind bars.(...)

Dr. Peccei wrote: "It is perhaps from the experiences of that period [of captivity] that I began to be convinced that lying latent in man is a great force for good."⁸ His insight resonates closely with the teachings of Buddhism. We possess a "great force for good" within us that cannot be defeated by any form of oppression or persecution. That indomitable "strong resolve" only appears when we directly encounter hardship. As the saying goes, "Adversity makes a person wise."

In his final years, Dr. Peccei also reached the conclusion that human revolution was vital. He declared: "From now on, everything depends on [modern man's] behavior and his decisions; it is he himself who, inadvertently or consciously, will shape his individual and collective destiny, and even the destiny of his species."⁹ He also said: "I have faith in man—and I believe in the human revolution."¹⁰

Among those who propagate this [Lotus] sutra in the Latter Day of the Law, who compares with Shariputra, Mahakashyapa, Perceiver of the World's Sounds, Wonderful Sound, Manjushri, and Medicine King? Persons of the two vehicles [such as Shariputra] had destroyed all the illusions of thought and desire, thus freeing themselves from the six paths. Bodhisattvas [such as Perceiver of the World's Sounds] had eradicated forty-one of the forty-two levels of ignorance and were like the moon on the fourteenth night before it

⁸ Aurelio Peccei, *The Human Quality* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1977), p. 8.

⁹ Ibid., p. 129.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 205.

reaches fullness. Nevertheless, Shakyamuni Buddha refused to entrust the mission of propagation to any of these people and gave it instead to the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. Thus these bodhisattvas are the ones who had thoroughly forged their resolve.

The mighty warrior General Li Kuang, whose mother had been devoured by a tiger, shot an arrow at the stone he believed was the tiger. The arrow penetrated the stone all the way up to its feathers. But once he realized it was only a stone, he was unable to pierce it again. Later he came to be known as General Stone Tiger. This story applies to you. Though enemies lurk in wait for you, your resolute faith in the Lotus Sutra has forestalled great dangers before they could begin. Realizing this, you must strengthen your faith more than ever. It is impossible to say all I want to in one letter.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren (WND-1, 953)

Bodhisattvas of the Earth—Distinguished by Their Thoroughly Forged Resolve

In this passage the Daishonin inquires to whom the propagation of the Lotus Sutra in the Latter Day of the Law has been entrusted.

Shariputra and Mahakashyapa are direct disciples of Shakyamuni and representatives of the practitioners of the two vehicles. Perceiver of the World's Sounds, Wonderful Sound, Manjushri, and Medicine King are bodhisattvas who assembled for the preaching of the Lotus Sutra. Both the Buddha's disciples and the bodhisattvas have extremely impressive credentials.

However, Shakyamuni did not entrust them with the difficult task of propagating the Lotus Sutra in the Latter Day of the Law; instead, he left it to the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. The Daishonin describes the Bodhisattvas of the Earth as "ones who had thoroughly forged their resolve" (WND-1, 953). As the Lotus Sutra teaches, persecution and difficulties are unavoidable in propagating the sutra in the Latter Day of the Law: "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?" (LSOC10, 203 [LS10, 164]). The Daishonin repeated this passage often, and applied it to his own life. What is the quality needed to be able to carry out this most difficult of undertakings? A thoroughly forged resolve.

The root meaning of "to forge" is to repeatedly heat and fashion metal until it is strengthened. In another letter to Shijo Kingo illustrating this point, the Daishonin writes: "Untempered iron quickly melts in a blazing fire. . . . But a sword, even when exposed to a great fire, withstands the heat for a while, because it has been well forged" (WND-1, 839).

Deep Determination Can Make the Impossible Possible

At the end of this letter, Nichiren Daishonin encourages Shijo Kingo, who was a member of the Kamakura warrior class, by sharing an anecdote about how the ancient Chinese General Li Kuang received the name “General Stone Tiger.”(...)

Through this famous anecdote, the Daishonin sought to teach Shijo Kingo the importance of basing himself on strong, indestructible faith, and that such faith is certain to move the heavenly deities to protect him. The Daishonin encourages Kingo: “Though enemies lurk in wait for you, your resolute faith in the Lotus Sutra has forestalled great dangers before they could begin. Realizing this, you must strengthen your faith [in the Gohonzon] more than ever” (WND-1, 953).(...)

He also wrote these words that are an eternal guideline for all who practice his teaching: “Employ the strategy of the Lotus Sutra before any other” (WND-1, 1001).(...)

Our valiant efforts as members of the SGI to make the 21st century a century of the victory of the people and a century of human revolution are now becoming more and more important.

In this corrupt and troubled world rife with the three poisons, we must take action with courage, wisdom, and compassion, wielding the mighty sword of faith in the Mystic Law. Let’s press onward with the dauntless confidence and pride of Bodhisattvas of the Earth, firmly establishing the spirit of human revolution in our lives.