

SGI President Ikeda's Study Lecture Series

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

“The Strategy of the Lotus Sutra”

Faith for Absolute Victory—The Legacy Passed from Mentor to Disciple¹

[...] Buddhism is win or lose. It is a struggle between enlightenment² and ignorance.³ Kosen-rufu is a battle between the Buddha and devilish functions. Our heart or mind is what decides our victory or defeat in all things. Spiritual victors can lead lives that are not defeated by anything. The secret to adorning our lives with brilliant victory is the “strategy of the Lotus Sutra.”

In this installment, we will study “The Strategy of the Lotus Sutra,” in which the Daishonin teaches the key ingredients for faith for absolute victory. Let us strive to learn from these lessons and engrave them in our lives.

I have carefully read your letter, in which you [Shijo Kingo] described the recent skirmish with powerful enemies. So they have finally attacked you. It is a matter of rejoicing that your usual prudence and courage, as well as your firm faith in the Lotus Sutra, enabled you to survive unharmed. (WND-1, 1000)

[...] October 1279, when this letter is dated, coincides with the height of the Atsuhara Persecution.⁴ The entire community of the Daishonin's believers was engaged in a struggle against formidable obstacles.

In his letter, the Daishonin lists three reasons why Kingo triumphed in his recent skirmish. The

¹ SGI Newsletter 7561.

² Enlightenment here refers to the Dharma nature, the unchanging nature inherent in all things and phenomena. Dharma nature is a concept equal to the “true aspect” (Jpn. *jisso*) of all phenomena, or “the true aspect of reality” (*shinnyo*). In Buddhism, the term *dharma* means both phenomena and the truth underlying them. A Buddha is defined as one who is enlightened to the essential nature of phenomena, and an ordinary person as one who is ignorant of this nature. Hence both enlightenment and ignorance, or darkness, originate from one source, the essential nature of phenomena.

³ Ignorance: Also, illusion or darkness. In Buddhism, ignorance about the true nature of existence. Ignorance is the first of the twelve-linked chain of causation, the sequence of causal relationships connecting ignorance with suffering. In the concept of the twelve-linked chain of causation, ignorance is the fundamental cause of delusion, suffering, and transmigration in the realm of delusion and suffering.

⁴ Atsuhara Persecution: A series of threats and acts of violence against followers of Nichiren in Atsuhara Village, in Fuji District of Suruga Province, beginning around 1275 and continuing until around 1283. In 1279, 20 farmers were unjustly arrested and sent to Kamakura, where they were interrogated by Hei no Saemon, the deputy chief of the Office of Military and Police Affairs, who demanded that they renounce their faith; however, not one of them yielded. Eventually, three of these peasant followers were executed—the brothers Jinshiro, Yagoro, and Yarokuro. They are known as the three martyrs of Atsuhara.

first is “usual prudence.” In other words, staying alert, taking careful precautions, paying close attention to what’s happening, and never slackening for a moment in any of those efforts. The second is “courage.” Namely, the courage to deal calmly with any crisis, along with the wisdom that derives from such courage. And third is “firm faith in the Lotus Sutra.” That is to say, the strong resolve to maintain steadfast faith in the Mystic Law, no matter what happens. This is the foundation for everything else. Because, ultimately, prudence and courage derive from faith. (...) If we let down our guard or are the least bit careless, we risk being overrun and defeated by negative forces. That’s why it’s crucial for us to have strong faith and keep working at strengthening it without cease. Acting with wisdom based on such faith is the key to victory. That’s why it’s crucial for us to have strong faith and keep working at strengthening it without cease. Acting with wisdom based on such faith is the key to victory.

When one comes to the end of one’s good fortune, no strategy whatsoever avails. When one’s karmic rewards are exhausted, even one’s retainers no longer follow one. You survived because you still have both good fortune and rewards. Moreover, in the “Entrustment” chapter [of the Lotus Sutra], the heavenly gods and benevolent deities pledged to protect the votaries of the Lotus Sutra.⁵ Of all the guardian deities in heaven, it is the gods of the sun and moon who visibly protect us. How can we doubt their protection? The heavenly deity Marichi in particular stands in service before the god of the sun. When the god of the sun protects the votaries of the Lotus Sutra, how could the honorable one of heaven Marichi, who is his vassal, possibly abandon them? The “Introduction” chapter of the sutra reads, “[At that time Shakra Devanam Indra with his followers, twenty thousand sons of gods, also attended.] There were also the sons of gods Rare Moon [the god of the moon], Pervading Fragrance [the god of the stars], Jeweled Glow [the god of the sun], and the four heavenly kings, along with their followers, ten thousand sons of gods” [LS1, 4]. Marichi must be among the thirty thousand sons of gods [who were followers of the gods of the moon, stars, and sun] who were present at the ceremony [i.e., the assembly where Shakyamuni preached the Lotus Sutra]. Otherwise, this deity could only abide in hell.

You must have escaped death because of this deity’s protection. Marichi gave you skill in swordsmanship, while I, Nichiren, have bestowed on you the five characters of the title of the Lotus Sutra [Myoho-enge-kyo]. There can be no doubt that Marichi protects those who embrace the Lotus Sutra. Marichi also upholds the Lotus Sutra and helps all living beings. Even the words [of the warrior mantra] “Those who join the battle are all in the front

⁵ Possibly a reference to the passage that reads: “We will respectfully carry out all these things just as the World-Honored One has commanded” (LS22, 278).

lines”⁶ derive from the Lotus Sutra. This is what is meant by the passage “If they [those who uphold the Lotus Sutra] should expound some text of the secular world or speak on matters of government or occupations that sustain life, they will in all cases conform to the correct Law” [cf. LS19, 263]. Therefore, you must summon up the great power of faith more than ever. Do not blame the heavenly gods if you exhaust your good fortune and lose their protection. (WND-1, 1000)

Faith That Activates the Heavenly Deities

The Daishonin asserts that Shijo Kingo survived the attack on him because he “still had both good fortune and rewards” (WND-1, 1000). “Good fortune” here means luck, while “rewards” refers to blessings that have been received in return for virtuous acts. From the profound view of Buddhism, luck is not just a matter of chance or coincidence; it is actually the result of the blessings we have accumulated in our lives. We’re the ones who are responsible for improving our luck or good fortune and increasing our blessings or karmic rewards.

The Daishonin then goes on to discuss the principle of protection by the heavenly deities—the benevolent functions of the universe—in order to clarify that Shijo Kingo’s own faith in the Lotus Sutra was the source of the “good fortune and rewards” that saved him from danger. In the Lotus Sutra, the heavenly deities are described as making a pledge to protect the sutra’s votaries. Here, the Daishonin says that among all these innumerable guardian deities, it is the gods of the sun and the moon who carry out the function of protecting the saha world⁷ in a form that is clearly discernible to us. He further states that specifically in the case of Shijo Kingo’s recent skirmish, protection was no doubt lent by the heavenly deity Marichi, a vassal of the god of the sun. [...]

The Daishonin states that it was Marichi who gave Shijo Kingo his skill in swordsmanship when he succeeded in driving off his attackers, and that this function of Marichi was produced by the power of the five characters of Myoho-enge-kyo that he had bestowed on his disciple.

The protection of the heavenly deities functions in accord with the principle of “the Buddha nature manifesting itself from within resulting in protection from without” (cf. WND-1, 848). In other words, when we believe in the Lotus Sutra and chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, we reveal our innate Buddha nature and this in turn activates the Buddha nature of all living beings which then function to protect us from without. This is what we refer to as the workings of the heavenly deities. Hence, the Daishonin declares that those who uphold faith in Nam-

⁶ A quote from the fourth-century Taoist work Pao-p’u Tzu (Baopuzi). Chinese soldiers believed that reciting this phrase while drawing four vertical and five horizontal lines in the air with their fingers would protect them from harm. This practice later spread to Japan and was widely adopted among the samurai of the Kamakura period (1185–1333).

⁷ Saha world: This world, which is filled with suffering. Often translated as the world of endurance. Saha means the earth; it derives from a root meaning “to bear” or “to endure.” In this context, the saha world indicates a world in which people must endure suffering.

myoho-rence-kyo, the essence of the Lotus Sutra, will definitely be safeguarded by these protective forces.

The Mystic Law Is the Source of All Wisdom

The Daishonin then goes on to explain the principle that “the affairs of this world are Buddhism,”⁸ in order to show that faith in the Lotus Sutra can serve as a source of value creation in all spheres of human endeavor. He offers as an example the famous nine-character mantra of the day recited by warriors as an incantation to protect them from harm in battle: “Those who join the battle are all in the front lines”. [...]

The Daishonin asserts that this phrase also derives from the Lotus Sutra, citing as evidence the following passage from the “Benefits of the Teacher of the Law” (19th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra: “If they [those who uphold the Lotus Sutra] should expound some text of the secular world or speak on matters of government or occupations that sustain life, they will in all cases conform to the correct Law” [cf. LS19, 263] (WND-1, 1000).

[...] When recited by a practitioner of the Mystic Law, even the warrior mantra “Those who join the battle are all in the front lines” will manifest the value it was originally believed to possess—namely, that of protecting those who recite it. This is because its protective power is ultimately a function of the Mystic Law.

At essence, all of the best wisdom and cultural traditions that have developed with the aim of promoting human happiness, security, and prosperity in no way run counter to the Mystic Law.

The Daishonin writes: “When the skies are clear, the ground is illuminated. Similarly, when one knows the Lotus Sutra, one understands the meaning of all worldly affairs” (WND-1, 376). If we “know the Lotus Sutra”—that is, believe in the Mystic Law—we will “understand the meaning of all worldly affairs”—that is, we can bring forth true wisdom regarding all affairs of society, such as those of work or daily life, and live correctly. At the same time, it means that we must make every effort to develop this ability. Faith shouldn’t make us complacent. Rather, it should spur us to do our very best, to apply ourselves with wisdom, dedication, and energy to all areas of our life—be it work, study, child raising, or fostering friendships in the local community.

Masakado was renowned as a brave general who had mastered the art of war, yet he was defeated by the armies under the emperor’s command. Even [famous warriors of ancient China such as] Fan K’uai and Chang Liang had their failures. It is the heart that is important. No matter how earnestly Nichiren prays for you, if you lack faith, it will be like trying to set fire to wet tinder. Spur yourself to muster the power of faith. Regard your survival as wondrous.

⁸ The Daishonin cites the Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai as saying: “In the Golden Light Sutra it is recorded that ‘all the good teachings that exist in the world derive from this sutra. To have a profound knowledge of this world is itself Buddhism’” (WND-1, 221).

Employ the strategy of the Lotus Sutra before any other. “All others who bear you enmity or malice will likewise be wiped out”⁹ [cf. LS23, 288]. These golden words will never prove false. The heart of strategy and swordsmanship derives from the Mystic Law. Have profound faith. A coward cannot have any of his prayers answered.

With my deep respect,

Nichiren

(WND-1, 1000–1001)

The Essence of Buddhism: The Heart Is Most Important

Masakado refers to Taira no Masakado (d. 940), a great Japanese warrior of the Heian period (794–1185) who possessed outstanding military skill and achieved dominion over the Kanto region in eastern Japan. Nevertheless, he and his forces were destroyed on the orders of the imperial court, which felt threatened by his growing power.

Fan K’uai (Fan Kuai), who excelled in valor, and Chang Liang (Zhang Liang), a brilliant strategist, were famous generals of ancient China. They lent their support to Liu Pang (Liu Bang; 256–195 B.C.E.), who later became the first emperor of the Han dynasty [...] Their quick-witted and decisive action also saved Liu from an assassination attempt during his meeting with another noted warlord, Hsiang Yü. [...]

No matter how skilled Fan K’uai and Chang Liang may have been in the art of war, had they not shared Liu Pang’s commitment to fight for a noble cause, they wouldn’t have been able to make the great contributions they did to the founding of the Han dynasty; all of their strategies would have been to no avail. Power, military prowess, wealth, fame, and other external trappings do not automatically translate into victory. Nor do they guarantee happiness.

“It is the heart that is most important” (WND-1, 1000). This is the Daishonin’s ultimate conclusion. Happiness is not determined by educational background, titles, social status, organizational position, or age. It all comes down to our heart or mind. A heart can be clouded by darkness, or ignorance; or it can shine brightly as an entity of the Mystic Law, free of all such ignorance. A deluded mind is trapped in a descending cycle of negativity and misery [...] In contrast, an enlightened mind—one that shines as an entity of the Mystic Law—carves out a solid, ascending path of optimism and hope, having the power to transform that which is negative into something positive. The potential for both these states of mind exist within our lives. [...] We can transform ignorance into enlightenment, thereby changing poison into medicine. That is why the Law is described as mystic or wondrous.

A mind that has broken free of the fetters of ignorance is as vast as the sky and as free as a soaring eagle. [...] It is filled with the Buddha wisdom to be able to rise above and overcome

⁹ In the sutra, the sentence reads in the past tense. It was changed here to fit the context of this letter.

all ills and misfortunes.

The power of the mind is truly unfathomable. A subtle change in our mind can change everything. The practice that lets us draw forth this power of the mind is chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo for ourselves and others. [...] Making full use of this power of the mind is the key to victory in terms of both our daily life and our eternal existence. This is none other than the “strategy of the Lotus Sutra.”

Sharing the Same Commitment as the Mentor

Nichiren Daishonin actualized this ultimate true potential of the mind, and he inscribed the Gohonzon—the object of devotion—as a direct expression of the vast and boundless state of life he achieved. Consequently, when we single-mindedly chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with faith in the Gohonzon, it is like facing a mirror and seeing our inner universe—that is, the towering life-state of Buddhahood—clearly reflected back at us. We can manifest in our own lives the same courageous life-state of the lion king, just as the Daishonin did. [...]

The Daishonin declares: “This Gohonzon also is found only in the two characters for faith”¹⁰ (WND-1, 832). In the passage “It is the heart that is important,” “heart” can be interpreted as “faith.” A heart of true and genuine faith is an unsurpassed treasure; it contains within it all the treasures of the universe.

In “The Strategy of the Lotus Sutra,” as in other writings, the Daishonin emphasize one important point regarding our attitude in faith. And that is praying and striving with the same spirit as the mentor. We can discern this message in the following passage: “No matter how earnestly Nichiren prays for you, if you lack faith, it will be like trying to set fire to wet tinder” (WND-1, 1000–01). [...]

In the passage, “It is the heart that is important,” “heart” can also be interpreted as “the spirit of sharing the same heart as the mentor.” The Daishonin writes: “Those with the heart of a lion king are sure to attain Buddhahood. Like Nichiren for example.” (WND-1, 302).

The heart of faith to actively propagate the Mystic Law, the heart of a disciple to actively support the mentor, and the heart of a lion to actively speak out for truth and justice—these are the most powerful weapons and strategies we have for achieving peace and securing happiness across the three existences of past, present, and future. This, the Daishonin says, is the “strategy of the Lotus Sutra” (WND-1, 1001).

The Strategy of the Lotus Sutra: Faith That Brings Absolute Victory

[...] The “strategy of the Lotus sutra” refers to faith in the Gohonzon. It is faith that battles ignorance and delusion, breaks through negative karma, and wins without fail through confident prayer and the boundless wisdom and courage that flow forth as a result. [...]

The Daishonin cites the passage from the “Medicine King” chapter of the Lotus Sutra: “All

¹⁰ The Japanese word for faith consists of two Chinese characters.

others who bear you enmity or malice will likewise be wiped out” [cf. LS23, 288] (WND-1, 1001). These words indicate one example of the immense good fortune that comes from embracing and propagating the Lotus Sutra. Being able to defeat all obstacles and negative forces through faith in the Mystic Law is the power of the “strategy of the Lotus Sutra.” [...]

At the end of his letter to Shijo Kingo, the Daishonin writes: “Have profound faith. A coward cannot have any of his prayers answered” (WND-1, 1001).

[...] Cowardice prevents us from seeing the truth, from seeing things as they are. It can cause even a minor hardship to appear like a huge, immovable obstacle, and make even the door to a solution appear instead like a thick wall. Courage is, therefore, crucial. [...]

In terms of Buddhism, courage indicates the most sound and robust spirit that derives from our inherent Buddha nature, which could be described as our most “healthy state”; it means the fighting spirit to vanquish our fundamental darkness and instantly reveal our enlightened Dharma nature.

[...] For us, courage means to challenge the real-life issues confronting us right where we are with the belief that we ourselves are entities of the Mystic Law. This is the way to employ the strategy of the Lotus Sutra and construct an indestructible history of victory and glory.

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