

Study Material for July • August “Letter to Ko-ama Gozen”

(The following passage is taken from the book Learning From the Goshō: The Eternal Teachings of Nichiren Daishōnin by SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, pp. 107–21, and can also be found in The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishōnin, vol. 4, pp. 140–43.)

A Buddhist Is a Friend to Those Suffering

BUDDHISM comes to the aid of those suffering. A Buddhist is the foremost ally of people who are destitute or whose lives are filled with sorrow; those who are worn out from their earnest struggles in life; who are suffering.

The SGI is strong because it is uncompromising on this point. Though we may encounter a succession of great difficulties, as long as we maintain this spirit, the SGI will always be victorious.

Nichiren Daishōnin certainly didn't triumph in his struggles because he had allied himself with the powerful. Exactly the opposite was true. He loved the people, became their ally and exerted himself on their behalf. As a result, he realized victory amid great persecution.

I, Nichiren, am the most extraordinary person in Japan. The reason I say so is this. The seven reigns of heavenly gods I will set aside, and the five reigns of earthly gods¹ are beyond my knowledge, but throughout the ninety reigns from the time of the first human emperor Jimmu until the present, or during the more than seven hundred years since the reign of Emperor Kimmei [when Buddhism was introduced to this country], no one has ever been so universally hated as Nichiren on account of either secular or Buddhist matters. Mononobe no Moriya² burnt down temples and pagodas, and Kiyomori Nyudo³ had Todai-ji and Kofuku-ji temples destroyed, but the people of their clans did not harbor hatred toward them. Masakado⁴ and Sadato⁵ rebelled against the imperial court, and the Great Teacher Dengyo incurred antagonism from the priests of the seven major temples of Nara,⁶ but these men were not hated by priests, nuns, laymen and laywomen throughout the whole of Japan. In my case, however, parents, brothers, teachers and fellow priests—every single person from the ruler on down to the common people—treat me as if I were their parents' enemy, and show me more hostility than if I were a rebel or a robber.

Thus, at times I have been vilified by several hundred people; and at other times, besieged by several thousands, I have been attacked with swords and staves. I have been driven from my residence and banished from my province. Finally I twice incurred the regent's displeasure, being exiled once to Izu Province and again to Sado Island. When I was banished to Sado in the northern sea, I had neither provisions to sustain me nor even clothes as coarse as those made of wisteria vines to cover my body. The people there, both priests and laity, hated me even more than did the men and women of Sagami

Title: Letter to Ko-ama Gozen

Subject: Living Buddhism 07/98 v.2 n.7 p.4 LB9807p04

Author: Daisaku Ikeda

Keywords: Daishōnin Gozen Ko-ama Letter Major Material Nichiren Study Writings

Province.⁷ Abandoned in the wilderness and exposed to the snow, I sustained my life by eating grass.

I felt as though I were personally experiencing the sufferings of Su Wu,⁸ who survived by eating snow while living in captivity in the land of the northern barbarians for nineteen years, or of Li Ling,⁹ who was imprisoned in a rocky cave on the shore of the northern sea for six years. I underwent this ordeal not because of any fault of my own but solely because of my desire to save all the people of Japan. (MW-4, 140–42)

JOSEI Toda often said, “Compared to the Daishonin’s suffering on Sado, our own difficulties, no matter how great they might seem, are nothing.” And Tsunesaburo Makiguchi stoically endured the harrowing conditions of prison life, saying, “While it might seem that a calamity has befallen us, it is hardly a fraction of what the Daishonin underwent.”

The Daishonin deliberately sought out extreme hardship for the sake of his followers in later generations. By summoning difficulties and then overcoming them, he established the eternal prime point for the widespread propagation of the Mystic Law.

It is said that good medicine tastes bitter. The “Life Span” chapter of the Lotus Sutra relates the parable of the excellent physician and his sick children. This parable describes how an excellent physician (the Buddha) tries to cure his children (all people) who have mistakenly drunk poison by giving them good medicine (the Mystic Law). But because the poison has deeply penetrated their bodies, the children, in their deluded state, do not want to take the good medicine that will effect their cure.

Although Nichiren Daishonin strove to “save all the people of Japan,” not only did people, including the arrogant authorities, refuse to take the good medicine that he proffered, but they persecuted and tried to do away with him. It was truly a case of “the poison [having] penetrated deeply” (LS16, 228).

“I, Nichiren, am the most extraordinary person in Japan,” the Daishonin says. He means that for having propagated the Mystic Law, he has acquired ill repute second to none.

In this passage he describes his sadness and indignation at the deluded state of the country, and at the same time his immense compassion—not diminished in the least by the hardships he has endured—to lead all people to happiness. We also see the Daishonin’s great and imperturbable confidence in kosen-rufu in the future. In addition, these words convey his pride in being the true votary of the Lotus Sutra and in having encountered the great persecutions that the sutra predicts will befall its votary in the Latter Day of the Law.

The Daishonin views himself with an objective gaze, using expressions that suggest a sense of detachment. In this we can sense the Daishonin’s state of life. It is as though he is laughing heartily, from high above, at the storm of persecution unfolding beneath him. We can almost hear the Daishonin declare: “To undergo persecution for the Lotus Sutra is the greatest honor. I have won!”

However, while I was in exile there, you and your husband Ko Nyudo,

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avoiding the eyes of others, brought me food by night. You were both ready to give your lives for my sake without fearing punishment from the provincial officials. (MW-4, 142)

WHEN the Daishonin first arrived at Sanmai-do¹⁰ in Tsukahara, Sado Island, on November 1, 1271, he was accompanied by a number of disciples. But several weeks later, he sent most of them back to the mainland. This is indicative of just how short they were on food.

Even after the Daishonin went to live in relative comfort at Ichinosawa (also on Sado), he was allowed only a meager ration, barely enough to sustain him and his disciples.

Under such circumstances, out of their sincere concern for the Daishonin, Abutsu-bo and Ko Nyudo secretly brought him food in the middle of the night. Had they been observed by the Nembutsu followers or officials who kept watch on the Daishonin's crude hut day and night, it would have been calamitous for them. Being caught supplying the Daishonin with food would have meant banishment or imprisonment.

In fact, on three occasions documents were fabricated, purporting to convey government orders. These stated, for example, that any person supporting the Daishonin "should be driven out of the province or imprisoned" (MW-1, 191-92).

Some were jailed simply because they had passed in front of the Daishonin's hut; others were banished or their spouses and children arrested because they had given the Daishonin something. Abutsu-bo and his wife Sennichi-ama were fined and driven from their place of residence, which was confiscated (MW-6, 256).

Even so, Abutsu-bo and Sennichi-ama, and Ko Nyudo and Ko-ama were not afraid. The Daishonin says that at one point they were even ready to die in his place. Mentor and disciple should support each other with a willingness to face hardship.

"How can we allow our mentor to suffer alone? Let us face difficulties to lighten the burden of our mentor" That was their spirit. What wondrous people! The Daishonin says that he will never forget them in any life to come (MW-6, 258). The honor due Ko Nyudo and the Daishonin's other followers is eternal. People will sing their praises for ten thousand years, for all eternity. The Daishonin's followers will never be forgotten.

We, the members of the SGI, are creating a global foundation for kosen-rufu in the Latter Day. We are conducting activities not for the short term but with a view toward the next ten thousand years and more.

Those who struggle to the full extent of their abilities now, at this time, will also gain eternal honor. We can imagine 100 or 200 years hence, when our descendants proudly say, "Think of it, my ancestors devoted their lives to kosen-rufu in this area."

Therefore, although life on Sado was harsh, I was loath to leave, feeling as if my heart were being left behind, and I seemed to be pulled back with each

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step I took. (MW-4, 142)

IN another Goshō, the Daishōnin says: “Though water may be muddied, it will become clear again. Though the moon may hide behind the clouds, it will surely reappear” (MW-5, 296).

On March 8, 1274, a letter of pardon from the government reached the Daishōnin in his place of exile. The charges against him had been proven groundless.

It was springtime, and the seasonal flowers were racing into bloom. While the danger to the Daishōnin naturally had not disappeared, for the disciples accompanying him, the journey back to Kamakura must have seemed like a proud and triumphant return.

But it pained the Daishōnin to part with the people of Sado. These were friends who had joined him in life-or-death struggles, and they might never meet again. For his followers in Sado as well, with each passing day their delight at his being pardoned must have been increasingly tempered by the sadness of separation.

Of course they were overjoyed. No longer was it necessary for them to worry about officials watching them. Joining hands with the Daishōnin and his disciples, they rejoiced at his vindication. At the same time, though, they shed tears of sorrow for his departure. Nichiren Daishōnin and Nikkō Shōnin must have been deeply touched.

On March 13, the Daishōnin left Ichinosawa. His followers probably wanted to accompany him as far as they could. The Daishōnin may have had to tell them time and again, “Thank you for accompanying us, but you’ve really come far enough,” urging them not to go any further.

With each few steps, the Daishōnin and his disciples may have stopped and turned around to bid farewell to their Sado friends who, in turn, continued to wave until the Daishōnin and his party were no longer in sight. You can easily imagine such a scene.

There is an expression in Japanese to “feel as if one’s hair is being pulled from behind,” which indicates a great reluctance to leave a person or place behind. The Daishōnin remarks that though his head was shaven, he still felt drawn back.

He says,¹¹ “Although life on Sado was harsh, I was loath to leave, feeling as if my hair, though shorn, was being pulled from behind, and I seemed to be pulled back with each step I took.” This brief passage is imbued with Nichiren Daishōnin’s irrepressible sentiments. As they listened to this letter being read, the hearts of Ko-ama and the others must have swelled with fond memories of that day.

The Daishōnin sounds like someone who has left his home. Far from expressing resentment or complaints about his exile, he regrets having had to leave Sado. Nichiren Daishōnin had changed his harsh place of exile into a blissful pure land of heart-to-heart friendships.

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Persecutions Are an Honor

I wonder what karmic bonds we formed in the past. Just when I was thinking how mysterious it was, you sent your most precious husband as your messenger to this distant place. I thought it must be a dream or an illusion. Even though I cannot see you, I am convinced that your heart remains here with me. (MW-4, 142–43)

The followers on Sado had carried on their faith in the midst of great persecution. Therefore, there was nothing false or fickle in their attitude. The Daishonin placed the greatest trust in them. In one passage, he goes so far as to suggest that Abutsu-bo is the reincarnation of Bodhisattva Pure Practices (Jpn. Jyogyo), one of the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth.

Even after the Daishonin went to live at Mount Minobu, his followers in Sado made the long journey to visit him. He was visited not only by Abutsu-bo and Ko Nyudo, but also by Abutsu-bo's son, Tokuro Moritsuna, and by Nakaoki Nyudo.¹² Longing to see the Daishonin, they undertook the arduous journey to Mount Minobu—difficult to make even once—a number of times. In modern terms, this would probably be comparable to going from Japan to South America. And relatively speaking, it was even further, an even more difficult trip.

The Gosho “Letter to Zenichi-ama” describes how a follower from Sado spent an entire month serving the Daishonin at Mount Minobu, foraging, carrying water and gathering firewood for him (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1335).

The Daishonin and his followers shared heart-to-heart bonds. Once during a widespread epidemic, the Daishonin became deeply concerned about the Sado people. As soon as he saw the face of Abutsu-bo, who paid him a visit at that time, the Daishonin asked: “Is your wife, Sennichi-ama, OK? How is Ko Nyudo?” On learning that they were safe and well, he breathed a sigh of relief (MW-6, 257–58).

Those Who Undergo Great Persecution Together Forge Eternal Bonds

Whenever you yearn for me, Nichiren, look toward the sun which rises in the morning and the moon which appears in the evening. I will invariably be reflected in the sun and the moon. In the next life, let us meet in the pure land of Eagle Peak. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

Nichiren

The sixteenth day of the sixth month (MW-4, 143)

Whenever one of the husbands departed from Mount Minobu, the Daishonin wrote a letter for him to take back to his wife. The Daishonin did this to praise the faith of the wife who had sent her husband on the journey. Above all, the Daishonin was keenly aware of the sadness that these elderly women must

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have felt knowing that they could never again meet him face to face.

“Even though you are in Sado, your heart has come here to Mount Minobu,” he says warmly. “It is the same as if we had met.” “Let us look forward to our meeting at Eagle Peak.” “Whenever you look upon the sun or moon, your thoughts are with me.”

The sun and moon can be seen from anywhere. “When you long for me,” he says, “look at the sun, look at the moon. And I will be there.” So great was his concern for these pure-minded followers. These words express his immense state of life. For him, it was as though the entire universe was his backyard.

The two women then, whenever they looked up at the sky—morning, midday, evening or night—probably sensed that they were gazing up at the Daishonin’s merciful countenance.

Even if someone is close by, their heart may be far away. On the other hand, even if someone is far away, if there is a heart-to-heart bond, they could not be closer. The heart is what counts. In the world of the heart, there is no separation. And chanting daimoku erases distance.

President Toda, in a letter from prison to his son, who had been evacuated from Tokyo to avoid the air raids, wrote:

I cannot see you for a while yet, but I want us to promise each other something. Sometime in the morning, whenever it is convenient for you, face the Gohonzon and chant daimoku 100 times. At the same time, I’ll chant 100 daimoku, too.

In this way we can communicate through the heart, just like through a wireless. We can talk with each other. We will create an alliance of father and son. Or we can include your mother, or grandfather and grandmother, too, if you like.

Someone who embraces faith is never isolated. The heart can communicate without fail.

The same is true of education in the home. You are busy doing activities for kosen-rufu. It may be that you cannot always be with your children. But spending a lot of time together with them is no guarantee that they will develop into fine men and women—that is another matter entirely. In fact, it sometimes happens that children whose parents spend a great deal of time with them become overly dependent and fail to develop a spirit of self-reliance.

The most noble thing is for parents to proudly teach their children a way of life of altruism and dedication to Buddhism, conveying this spirit through their lives. Forming a strong heart-to-heart bond with your children is the key to education in the home that produces outstanding individuals.

Of course, every home is different. We cannot make sweeping generalizations based on other people’s situations. Spending quality time with your children is very important—but the most crucial ingredient in education is a genuine heart-to-heart bond. This is the essence.

The basis for such a bond is deep prayer. It is important to make concrete

efforts to communicate your feelings and convictions to your children whenever the chance arises.

It was not authority that united the Daishonin and his followers; nor was it their concern for profit. They were united by the heart. For this reason, their bond was indestructible. For this reason, their lives overflowed with benefit and their connection was lofty and eternal. □

1. Seven reigns of heavenly gods and five reigns of earthly gods: Native deities said to have ruled Japan before the time of the first emperor Jimmu.
2. Mononobe no Moriya (d. 587): An official who opposed the adoption of Buddhism. When an epidemic broke out, he declared that it was because of the new religion, and attempted to halt all Buddhist practice.
3. Kiyomori Nyudo (1118–81): Taira no Kiyomori, leader of the Taira clan. In 1177, he uncovered a plot against his clan in Nara and had Todai-ji and Kofuku-ji temples razed in punishment for their support of the conspirators.
4. Masakado (d. 940): Taira no Masakado, a warrior who wielded power in eastern Japan. In 939, he rebelled against the imperial court by proclaiming himself the new emperor. However, he was killed and his rebellion crushed.
5. Sadato (1019–62): Abe no Sadato, the head of a powerful family in eastern Japan. He sought independence from imperial rule but was killed in battle.
6. Seven major temples of Nara: The principal Buddhist temples in Nara, Japan's capital during the Nara period (710–94), including Todai-ji and Kofuku-ji.
7. Sagami Province: Where Kamakura, the seat of the military government, was located.
8. Su Wu (140–60 B.C.E.): A minister of the Former Han dynasty. In 100 B.C.E., Emperor Wu sent Su Wu to the land of the nomadic Hsiung-nu tribes to demand that they acknowledge fealty to him. Their chieftain rejected the demand and had Su Wu imprisoned in a cave. He endured many hardships before being able to return to the Han.
9. Li Ling (d. 74 B.C.E.): A military commander during the Former Han dynasty. During one battle, he was captured by the Hsiung-un tribes and imprisoned. When news of his defeat reached the court, Emperor Wu mistakenly believed that he had revolted against the Han, and had all the members of his family killed. Later, the emperor repented, offering to secure his return. But Li Ling refused, dying in the land of the Hsiung-nu.
10. Sanmai-do: A dilapidated shrine in the middle of a graveyard where the Daishonin passed his first winter in exile on Sado.
11. The following is a literal translation of the Gosho passage quoted earlier.
12. Nakaoki Nyudo: A follower of Nichiren Daishonin who lived at Nakaoki on Sado Island. Even after the Daishonin was pardoned and went to live at Minobu, Nakaoki Nyudo sent him letters and sought his guidance.

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