

**SIGNIFICANT DATE: NICHIREN DAISHONIN'S BIRTHDAY — FEB. 16**

**Rising Above Our Destiny**

**BY JEFF FARR, ASSOCIATE EDITOR**

According to Buddhism, the circumstances in which we are born result from our karma or destiny. The land in which we are born, the parents to whom we are born — these are decided by karma we have created ourselves in the past.

In the Goshō “Letter from Sado,” Nichiren Daishonin writes that “Bodhisattva Fukyo [Never Despising] was vilified and beaten by countless slanderers because of his past karma. So, too, it is with Nichiren, who in this life was born poor and lowly to a *chandala* family” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 37).

(*Chandala* was the lowest class of people in India, even lower than the caste system; this class survived by the killing of living creatures, which was frowned upon.)

Nichiren Daishonin perhaps chose this word to describe his family because his father was a poor fisherman. Nichiren was born 775 years ago, on Feb. 16, 1222, as Zennichimaro (“Splendid Sun”), to Mikuni no Taifu, his father, and Umegiku-nyo, his mother.

“Letter from Sado,” which describes the unfortunate circumstances into which Nichiren was born, was written to Toki Jonin and other disciples in 1272 when Nichiren Daishonin was in exile on Sado Island.

He uses the difficulties of his life to teach his disciples an important lesson about the law of cause and effect, saying that all his misfortune came about because he slandered the Lotus Sutra in a past life.

Sharing simple examples based on the Hatsunaion Sutra, like “one who deprecates those of handsome appearance will be born ugly” (MW-1, 40), he explains cause and effect in a way that anyone can understand. Another example is that “one who mocks noble men or anyone who observes the precepts will be born to a poor family” (MW-1, 40).

But who would want to practice Buddhism if all it did was explain that the less than ideal circumstances we experience in our lives come from slander we committed in the past? In “Letter from Sado,” Nichiren Daishonin goes on to explain how we can alter our karma by protecting the Law.

He quotes the “Encouraging Devotion” (13th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra where it says that “it is due to the blessings obtained by protecting the Law that one can diminish...his suffering and retribution.”

While he may have been born to a poor family due to past slander, Nichiren now felt he was reversing this karma by defending the sutra. He was in fact sure he would “become a Buddha equal to Shakyamuni” (MW-1, 41). And he was telling his followers that the power of the Lotus Sutra would allow them, too, to overcome any kind of karma in this lifetime.

Throughout “Letter from Sado,” Nichiren Daishonin identifies himself with Bodhisattva Never Despising, whose story is told in the 20th chapter of the Lotus Sutra. Never Despising was kind and respectful to everyone he met, but still he had the karma for people to tease and even beat him — until he found the Lotus Sutra. Those who had persecuted him were then saved by his preaching of the sutra, eventually becoming his followers.

It is a basic principle of Buddhism that whatever our negative karma, just like Nichiren Daishonin or Bodhisattva Never Despising, we can change it into something wholly positive that will help others. We are thus not victims of destiny, but masters of it.

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