

SIGN POSTS: Standing Inside the Fire
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Carry through with your faith in the Lotus Sutra. You cannot strike fire from flint if you stop halfway. Bring forth the great power of faith.... (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 2 [2nd ed.], p. 201)

I failed.” “I am a failure.” Sometimes, in the midst of it all, these words echo through my head. My inner voice of self-judgment berates me. I add up my disappointments. A feeling of profound darkness sets in. And here in the prime of my life, I wonder why I should go on climbing my mountain of hopes and dreams.

Nichiren Daishonin, however, wrote the above words from a most uncomfortable exile: He and his followers had been persecuted; his living quarters were at that point a cold, ramshackle shrine in the middle of a graveyard. From such circumstances, though, he encouraged Shijo Kingo to continue his faith, using the analogy of striking fire from flint to show how our Buddha nature, inherent to our lives, can be brought forth.

The image of Nichiren bundled up and writing this letter encourages me. He could have decided to cut his losses and bag his philosophy for a warm bed and a smile from the powers that be. But the wisdom he brought forth was so profound that he knew his persecutions and obstacles were proof of this philosophy’s validity.

Garth Brooks sings a song that goes, “Life is not tried, it is merely survived, / If you’re standing outside the fire.” I think the real warmth in our lives comes not from comfort or ease but from the consistent efforts we make to stand up — in the fire of our sufferings — for our happiness and that of others.

As SGI President Ikeda said to the SGI-USA youth in 1990: “Lives being pulled toward misfortune and unhappiness are redirected and pulled in the opposite direction, toward good, when they make the Mystic Law their base. It is as if sufferings are made the fuel for a fire of joy and wisdom and compassion. It is the Mystic Law and faith which ignite that flame.” I know as long as I remember what ignites the flame, I’ll never be left standing outside the fire.

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