

ON THE BASIC IDEAS OF NICHIREN DAISHONIN'S BUDDHISM
WHAT A CONCEPT: Debts of Gratitude
We Owe It to Ourselves

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Suppose you're buried under a mountain of debt, as many Americans are today. Mortgages. Medical bills. Student loans. In terms of emotional stress and revolving credit, let's say you're maxed out.

So you turn to *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, volume 4, for sustenance. Your gaze falls on this passage: "What can we say, then, of persons who are devoting themselves to Buddhism? Surely they should not forget the debts of gratitude they owe to their parents, their teachers and their country" (MW-4, 171–72).

You may be inclined to think that your burden of debt just got heavier.

From the standpoint of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, though, financial debt and debts of gratitude are two completely different things. And since the word *debt* is most often associated with red ink these days, it may be a useful exercise to differentiate between money and Buddhism. In terms of money, if you spend more, you'll have less — and if you spend more than you have, you'll get into debt. In our traditional way of thinking, debts of gratitude are like financial debts — someone has done something good for us or given us something, and now we're obligated to repay this debt in kind.

But in Buddhism, recognizing debts of gratitude implies that we live with a deep awareness of our interconnection with others. The four debts of gratitude are: the debts one owes to one's parents; to all living beings; to one's sovereign (in modern terms, this could be interpreted as society and its functions to protect the people); and to the three treasures of the Buddha (Nichiren Daishonin), the Law (Nam-myoho-enge-kyo), and the priest (Nikko Shonin and, more broadly, other Buddhist believers).

We may feel a natural sense of gratitude toward these people and beings — gratitude toward our parents for giving us birth, gratitude toward the three treasures for making it possible for us to practice Buddhism, etc. — but what exactly do we owe them?

To quote the Daishonin: "If one intends to repay these great debts of gratitude, he can hope to do so only if he studies and masters the Buddhist teachings, becoming a person of wisdom" (MW-4, 172). It could be said, then, that we owe it to others — and to ourselves — to attain Buddhahood.

That is, we owe it to ourselves to appreciate and use the inherent value and potential we possess. And while we may have secular obligations, our most important obligation is to discover for ourselves the truth of Buddhism and to share it with others.

Nichiren Daishonin states: "If one hopes to study and master the Buddhist teachings, then he cannot do so without devoting time to the task. And if he wants to have time to spend on the undertaking, he cannot continue to wait on his parents, his teachers and his sovereign. Until he attains the road that leads to emancipation, he should not defer to the wishes and feelings of his parents and teachers, no matter how reasonable they may be" (MW-4, 172).

In this passage, the Daishonin teaches us that by practicing Buddhism correctly we can develop the wisdom to truly repay our debts of gratitude.

So, paradoxical as it may seem, debts of gratitude in Buddhism don't require one to give in to the wishes or judgments of others to whom one feels obligated. Rather, this very obligation necessitates that one find and follow one's own path, guided by Nam-myoho-enge-kyo.

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