

STANDS TO REASON: Drinking Poison

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The Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai...has said that to accept and to put faith in the doctrines of evil teachers is the same as drinking poison. You must beware of this! (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 5, p. 31)

It's thought that this letter was written in 1263, right after Nichiren Daishonin's exile to Izu ended (the recipient is unknown). The Daishonin had just returned to his old stomping ground of Kamakura when he wrote this.

Rather than go somewhere new, somewhere safer, to spread his teachings, the Daishonin decided to go right back to Kamakura — the place where he got into all the trouble that led to his exile. His propagation activities there incurred the wrath of Pure Land sect priests two years earlier, which led to the government exiling him.

Kamakura was the center of politics and was filled with the kind of priests who pined for such power. With all those influential, bad priests gathered in one place, the Daishonin felt Kamakura the best place to continue educating the people on the difference between good and bad priests.

As this quote shows, the Daishonin felt that important to this education was warning everyone of the dangers of trusting bad priests' teachings. Later in this letter, expanding on T'ien-t'ai's analogy that bad priests' ideas are like poison, the Daishonin says that to believe in them means cutting off your path to enlightenment. In other words, it's like drinking a poison designed to kill your Buddha nature. "Once you leave the haven of inherent enlightenment," the Daishonin asks, "what is there that can bring you joy?" (MW-5, 38).

The Daishonin's emphasis on enlightenment as inherent is compelling. When today's priesthood talks of enlightenment, the emphasis is usually on enlightenment through Nikken — that you can only attain this state through being connected or associated with him. A temple pamphlet attacking the Nichikan-transcribed Gohonzon calls Nikken "the only person to be bequeathed the Daishonin's Buddhism" and says that his sanctioning of the Gohonzon "is what makes the attainment of Buddhahood possible."

The temple also says that you cancel your enlightenment through membership in any religious organization that does not agree with whoever holds the position of high priest — never mind what the person's teachings are. If he's the high priest, he must be correct. No ifs, ands or buts. Hence, in their re-excommunication notice to SGI-USA members last October, the U.S. temples emphasized that: 1) The SGI is no longer connected to Nikken; and 2) That's why, if you stick with the SGI, "it will result in your loss of attaining merits (benefit). It will block your path to attaining enlightenment."

The Daishonin stresses in this letter, though, that you attain enlightenment through embracing the Mystic Law, through single-mindedly chanting and urging others to do the same (MW-5, 38). The only way you can close your enlightenment off, in the Daishonin's view, is through your own incorrect beliefs. For instance, through accepting the doctrines of evil teachers as your own.

To attain enlightenment or not is a decision, our own to make. And it's the most important decision we face in this life, says the Daishonin. Life is short — as short as breathing in and out just once, as he puts it in this letter — so why waste our lives being mistaken? Why waste our inherent enlightenment? With every breath we have in this life, we should, based on our faith, make something lasting. This is what the Daishonin urges us to do.

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