

STUDY MATERIAL FOR JANUARY • FEBRUARY “LETTER TO THE MOTHER OF OTO GOZEN” PART 1

The following excerpts from Nichiren Daishonin’s “Letter to the Mother of Oto Gozen” and accompanying commentary are from SGI President Ikeda’s book, Learning From the Gosho: The Eternal Teachings of Nichiren Daishonin, pp. 122–31.

To the mother of Oto Gozen:

Since you revere the Lotus Sutra, you are a woman who is certain to become a Buddha. [Therefore] although in my present circumstances I am ill disposed to write, I send you letters frequently. Also, I understand that you are looking after the disciples [in Kamakura]. I cannot thank you enough.

Above all, your having come here, even though you are a woman, is an expression of your profound spirit of faith. Whereas in my case, I am only here because I was made to come. I feel immensely indebted. (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1222)

A Person of Genuine Faith Shines When Faced With Great Obstacles

IT was a miraculous journey: a woman traveling all the way from Kamakura to Sado Island with her small child in tow. Braving mountainous terrain, treacherous passes, crossing the sea, she appeared breathlessly before Nichiren Daishonin in his place of exile.

“It was almost too amazing to be true” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 3, p. 197), the Daishonin says. At this unexpected appearance of one of his Kamakura followers, the Daishonin probably doubted his own eyes. To a place where no visitors came, here were two—a woman with a small child!

His initial surprise soon turned to profound concern. “How was your journey?” he asked. “Did you have any trouble on the way? Is your child all right? Seeing you is the most wonderful thing. Nothing could make me happier.”

The woman was a person of wholehearted faith. And doubtless she had deeply cherished the determination to see the Daishonin on Sado. “I cannot just sit idly by at this time when the Daishonin is battling great persecution,” she probably felt. She must have wanted to do anything she could to lighten his burden even a little.

This letter to the mother of Oto Gozen,¹ which was the name of the young child, praises a mother of seeking spirit who, seven centuries ago, single-mindedly advanced one step at a time in the footsteps of her mentor.

The letter is only dated November 3, but recent research supports the view that it was written at Sado in 1273.

In May the previous year, the Daishonin had written “Letter to Nichimyo Shonin” (MW-3, 43– 53). That letter also was to a woman who, like Oto Gozen’s mother, had traveled from Kamakura to visit the Daishonin at Sado with a young child. The Daishonin praises the woman highly, even giving her the Buddhist name Nichimyo Shonin.

It is generally believed today that Nichimyo Shonin and the mother of Oto Gozen were the same person. This lecture is based on that assumption.

Title: Letter To The Mother Of Oto Gozen (1)

Subject: Living Buddhism 01/99 v.99 n.1 p.10 LB9901p10

Author:

Keywords: Daishonin Followers Gosho Gozen January-February Letter Material Mother Nichiren People Study Writings

To the mother of Oto Gozen:

Since you revere the Lotus Sutra, you are a woman who is certain to become a Buddha. [Therefore] although in my present circumstances I am ill disposed to write,² I send you letters frequently. Also, I understand that you are looking after the disciples [in Kamakura]. I cannot thank you enough. (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1222)

“If you cannot become a Buddha,” he is saying in effect, “then who can?” “If you cannot become happy, then what is the purpose of Buddhism?” This question contains the Daishonin’s spirit.

In times of adversity we can understand a person’s true worth. The actions of Oto Gozen’s mother, Nichimyo Shonin, at the height of great persecution in which “999 out of 1,000 discarded their faith” (MW-3, 69), shine eternally. She is an eternal model for women throughout the ten thousand years and more of the Latter Day of the Law.

In the fall of 1271, when the Daishonin was nearly beheaded at Tatsunokuchi and then exiled to Sado Island, there also raged a storm of persecution against his followers. Some were incarcerated, some had their lands confiscated and some were driven out of Kamakura.

As a result of this wave of attacks, many disciples and lay followers abandoned faith. Others, who perhaps did not formally give up their faith, were inwardly defeated. And some not only abandoned faith but also maliciously reviled the Daishonin.

Certainly there were base people who betrayed their comrades and thought only of trying to protect themselves. In the end, such people wind up being trusted by no one. And, above all, they wind up unable to trust even themselves. Losing all support from both within and without, they meet pitiful ends.

But no storm, however great, could put out the fire that blazed in the life of the original Buddha. During his exile to Sado—the greatest persecution of his life—the Daishonin could say with imperturbable calm in “The Opening of the Eyes,” “I, Nichiren, am the richest man in all of present-day Japan” (MW-2 [2nd ed.], 151). He succeeded in leaving behind a monumental achievement.

“The flame in my heart for the salvation of all people burns stronger still,” he announces. “The Opening of the Eyes” is the Daishonin’s declaration of his spiritual victory to all his followers. This “message of light” must have illuminated their hearts when they were gritting their teeth in the face of great persecution and struggling to protect one another.

A small fire can easily be extinguished by a gust of wind. But with a large fire, it is just the opposite—the stronger the wind, the higher and more furiously it blazes. Great difficulties are a tailwind for the advance of kosen-rufu.

Shijo Kingo, to whom “The Opening of the Eyes” was entrusted, could not simply sit still in Kamakura. He struck out from the capital for Sado. And Oto Gozen’s mother also undertook the journey. While an adverse wind raged throughout the land, she sought the Daishonin without a second thought for personal safety.

“How could you fail to attain Buddhahood?” (MW-3, 199), the Daishonin asks, praising her efforts to seek him out and somehow repay her debt of gratitude. “Right now, what can I do to help?” she probably wondered.

It also seems that she had been diligently looking after the Daishonin’s priest disciples in Kamakura. And the Daishonin was profoundly grateful. “I cannot thank you enough,” he says. This passage conveys his sincerity.

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In recent years, though, we have seen a great many arrogant priests who take for granted others' efforts on their behalf. These priests have betrayed the Daishonin.

Above all, your having come here, even though you are a woman, is an expression of your profound spirit of faith. Whereas in my case, I am only here because I was made to come. I feel immensely indebted. (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1222)

Nichimyo Shonin's actions were an expression of her earnest faith. What we set our hearts on determines everything.

She certainly did not have particularly favorable circumstances. It appears that she had been separated from her husband for some time. And her daughter Oto Gozen was still, in the Daishonin's words, an "infant" (MW-3, 53).

But taking her beloved child along, she set out on the journey. It was not uncommon at the time for women to travel alone. In contrast to the well-maintained roads like the one between Kamakura and Kyoto, however, the route to Sado was a difficult one that entailed crossing both mountains and sea. It was a journey that could take even a strong man as long as three weeks.

We can get a sense of this journey's difficulty if we consider that the trip from Kamakura to Kyoto, a much longer distance, took about two weeks. Also, the stretch of sea that must be crossed to reach Sado is typically rough. People sometimes had to wait for several weeks for the waters to become calm enough to attempt a crossing. The journey by ship was an ordeal unimaginable by today's standards.

The Daishonin is not exaggerating when he describes it as a journey "over treacherous mountains and the raging sea." "The wind and rain," he adds, "make untimely onslaughts" (MW-3, 52).

What a difficult expedition it must have been for a woman with a small child! She plodded along in the early summer heat, taking her daughter by the hand or perhaps carrying her on her back, and wearily wiping the sweat from her brow.

Our Spirit Determines Everything

MOREOVER, this was immediately after an incident of internal strife within the ruling Hojo clan.³ There was much instability. The Daishonin says, "The people...are as bestial as dogs or tigers" (MW-3, 52). Also, the mountains were infested with bandits, and pirates lay in wait on the sea.

Many times, to avoid the night damp, the mother must have had to ask strangers to put them up for a night. There were probably also times when her daughter would not stop crying. Just thinking about it is heart wrenching. "You must have felt as though you were undergoing the sufferings of the three evil paths" (MW-3, 52), the Daishonin says. That's how difficult a journey it was—but the mother was not defeated.

Why not? Because she was determined to walk the same path to Sado that the Daishonin had walked. She wanted to shoulder the same hardships as her mentor. How admirable! How beautiful and noble!

Faith makes people strong. And people of genuine faith shine the most when they encounter great difficulties. Certainly, it is better not to have obstacles. But from another standpoint, difficulties are benefits. By challenging and overcoming them, we can

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forge a character of pure and immutable “gold.”

Even if all the leaves on a tree should fall off in a strong wind, as long as the branches and trunk remain intact, in time the tree will again produce flowers. Likewise, the spread of Buddhism will continue as long as there remain people of genuine faith. The important thing, therefore, is to raise one person of genuine faith.

The Daishonin praised the mother of Oto Gozen, saying, “You are undoubtedly the foremost votary of the Lotus Sutra among the women of Japan” (MW-3, 52). And he gave her the name Nichimyo Shonin.

Nichi is from Nichiren, meaning sun, and *myo* is the first part of *myoho*, or Mystic Law. He adds the honorific title Shonin, meaning sage or saint. We see that distinctions between priestly and lay, male and female, did not matter in the least to Nichiren Daishonin; he fixed his gaze solely on people’s hearts, their spirit.

Spirit means inner state of life, or one’s heart. It decides what we devote our lives to. It is the fundamental prayer on which we base our existence. A person’s spirit is invisible but becomes manifest at a crucial moment. Not only that, it also controls everything about a person, each moment of every day—it is the fundamental determinant of one’s life.

The Kegon Sutra says, “The heart is like a skilled painter.” Like a great painter, the heart freely creates representations of all things. One’s heart is the designer, the painter, the sculptor and the architect of his or her being.

The Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai cites this sutra passage in explaining the doctrine of a life-moment possessing three thousand realms. He uses the image of a great painter to explain that the heart manifests in the three thousand realms of all phenomena.

It is our spirit, our life-moment, that counts. Our spirit is our hopes, our prayers. And it can also be identified with the subconscious.

“What kind of future do I envision?” we may ask ourselves. “What kind of self am I trying to develop? What do I want to accomplish in my life?” We should paint this vision of our lives in our hearts as specifically as possible. This “painting” becomes the design for our future. The power of the heart enables us to actually execute a wonderful masterpiece in accordance with that design. This is the doctrine of a life-moment possessing three thousand realms.

The more specific and detailed the blueprint we have in our hearts, the better. The point is to continue vividly painting the target we have and to advance toward that goal single-mindedly. Then, at each instant, the reality of our lives will gradually approach the painting that is our aspiration.

Everything depends on what is in our hearts. Heartfelt prayers will definitely be answered. If we decide that something is impossible, then, consistent with our minds in thinking so, even things possible will become impossible. On the other hand, if we have the confidence that we can definitely do something, we are already one step closer to achieving it.

In accordance with the principle of a life-moment possessing three thousand realms, pessimistic thoughts or feelings take form, just as they are, in reality, producing negative results. People who have negative thoughts create effects for themselves that perfectly match their thinking.

So it is important to be optimistic. There is no such thing as pessimism in Buddhism. The Lotus Sutra gives us the key that enables us to possess great confidence and burn with hope even amid circumstances that appear despairing. Nichiren Daishonin proved this with his life.

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Amid the desolate conditions of Sado, the Daishonin says that he feels “great joy.” These words in fact conclude “The Opening of the Eyes.”

In a letter to his follower Sairen-bo, which he also wrote on Sado, the Daishonin calmly promises, “Although the lord of Kamakura may continue to refuse to pardon Nichiren, I will call upon the heavenly deities, and when I have returned to Kamakura, I will write to you” (MW-7 [2nd ed.], 27). True to his words, the Daishonin returned triumphantly to Kamakura. His victory over incredible odds is proof of the principle of a life-moment possessing three thousand realms.

Above all, I am confident that the Daishonin’s resolve for world kosen-rufu in the ten thousand years and more of the Latter Day was the cause that resulted in the appearance of the SGI, and it called forth Bodhisattvas of the Earth throughout the world.

The power of our hearts is great. Nichimyo Shonin’s heart was directed toward the Daishonin. And from him, she learned to share the Lotus Sutra’s ideal of all people becoming happy.

She was determined to travel to far-off Sado, even though it meant crossing mountains and treacherous waters. I hope that each of you will steadfastly advance one step at a time toward a great ideal, walking along roads, traveling over mountains and crossing seas, as need be, to reach it.

The Daishonin says, “Even common mortals can attain Buddhahood if they cherish one thing: earnest faith” (MW-1, 268).

We need to direct our spirit, our hearts, toward kosen-rufu. Attaining Buddhahood depends on cherishing such resolve. When we have such a spirit, our lives sparkle with jewels of good fortune and happiness. We undertake a wonderful journey through life in which our dreams, one after another, are accomplished. □

1. “Oto Gozen no Haha Gosho” (*Gosho Zenshu*, pp. 1222–23): thought to have been written in November 1273, when the Daishonin was 52.
2. The original Japanese could also be interpreted as meaning, “Although I am not much of a letter writer...”
3. In 1272, Hojo Tokisuke, an elder half brother of the ruling regent, Hojo Tokimune, plotted to seize power. But Tokimune discovered the plot and swiftly suppressed it by having his brother killed.

Milestones of the Thirteenth Century

While the historic events surrounding the life of Nichiren Daishonin were taking place in thirteenth-century Japan, other milestones were occurring in the world. The following are a random sampling of events that occurred around that time.

1250: The Inca state is born at Cuzco in the heart of the Andes Mountains in Peru.

1261: Latin Empire of Constantinople collapses.

1265–1321: Dante Alighieri, author of *Dante’s Inferno* and *The Divine Comedy*, lived.

1270: France’s Louis IX reigned for nearly forty-four years and was canonized as St. Louis in 1297.

1271: Marco Polo, 17, travels to India and the Far East.

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- 1271:** Kublai Khan founds the Mongol dynasty that will rule China until 1368.
- 1272:** A silk-reeling machine is invented and will spur the use of silk textiles.
- 1274:** Marco Polo visits Yunnan and will enter the service of Kublai Khan next year and will continue until 1292.
- 1274:** China's Kublai Khan sends an invasion fleet to conquer Japan, but a typhoon strikes November 20, sinking more than 200 Mongol ships along with 13,000 men sleeping aboard; the survivors retreat to the mainland in terror.
- 1275:** *Chirurgia* by William of Saliceto contains the earliest record of human dissection, a practice discouraged by the Church since 1163.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Date: November 3, 1272 or 1273.

Recipient: A woman living in Kamakura with her young daughter, Oto Gozen. Her name remains unknown, but she is thought to be the woman upon whom Nichiren Daishonin bestowed the Buddhist name Nichimyo Shonin or "Sage Sun-Mystic."

Background: The Daishonin, age 51 or 52, depending on the dating of the letter, was an exile on Sado at the time he penned this letter to thank the woman for her visit. The original, consisting of three pages, is extant at Cho'on temple in Nagasaki, Japan.

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