

## PUBLISHER'S COMMENTARY BEYOND THE BASICS

BACK to the basics. The phrase means different things depending on the context, but it always implies simplicity—a reduction of the complicated into something manageable, something learnable. In that sense, the idea of going back to the basics gives us a sense of hope, of possibility. If we can just improve on the basics, we can start making fresh progress in everything.

And of course, in our Buddhist practice, which provides a basis for all of life's activities, "faith, practice and study" constitutes the basics. As the Daishonin states, "Exert yourself in the two ways of practice and study.... Both practice and study arise from faith" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, pp. 94–95).

I recently had a chance to go see the popular comedy *Patch Adams*, which I feel, contains a message that resonates deeply with the true spirit of Buddhism. This movie's great popularity in spite of many critical reviews is encouraging, I think, because it suggests that people are looking for something more humane and more applicable to their lives than the stream of violence that characterizes many of today's movies.

It's about a medical student, Hunter "Patch" Adams, who defies conservative medical authority to employ humor and dialogue in treating sick patients.

Medicine, while generally directed toward helping people, contains some rather cold elements. And many people feel, with the increasingly business-driven orientation of the medical field, those cold parts are getting colder. As Patch becomes aware, much of medical training encourages a removal, an aloofness, from the patient. And while diligent and intensive study is encouraged, medical students have no opportunity before their third year to interact with patients.

At the beginning of the movie, Patch, on the verge of suicide, has voluntarily checked himself into the mental ward of a hospital. There, he discovers a treasure in his own life that was previously hidden. That treasure is his desire to help people, to serve and relieve those who are suffering. It is this new passion that motivates him to apply to medical school where he devotes himself to his studies. But there he finds administrators warning of the dangers of "transference"—becoming emotionally involved with a patient's suffering or needs—and stressing the need for doctors to develop "superhuman" qualities. Through rigid training and discipline, students are expected to overcome the human aspect of judgment and come to rely on pure reason and logic. They are warned not to "come down to the level" of patients.

Patch, however, believes that reaching the hearts of patients is just as important as the scientific treatment of disease. Humor and dialogue are the tools he feels most comfortable with, and are most important in reaching people's hearts. This puts him at odds with conservative medical school administrators. Though the movie makes its point with humor, and maybe with some exaggeration, I think the motivation behind Patch's struggle is important to leading a worthwhile existence. His passion to help others, the strong desire to engage people's hearts through dialogue, and his unflinching courage to stand up against those in positions of authority who seek to attack, suppress, or even expel him is most extraordinary.

As the Daishonin writes: "When it comes to understanding the Lotus Sutra, I have only a minute fraction of the vast ability that T'ien-t'ai and Dengyo possessed. But as regards my ability to endure persecution and the wealth of my compassion for others, I believe

they would hold me in awe” (MW-2, 100).

The qualities of passion, compassion and courage were the basis for the Daishonin’s actions—for his faith, practice and study of Buddhism. They arose from his Buddhahood. They are also the basics of the Gakkai spirit to spread the Law for the happiness of others, for the happiness of humanity, without regard for personal gain.

IN a recent speech, President Ikeda quoted the second Soka Gakkai president, Josei Toda, regarding the importance of courage: “It is important to have compassion,” said Toda, “but compassion must ultimately be backed by courage. Only through courageous action can we be truly compassionate. Compassion and courage are two sides of the same coin” (September 18, 1998, *World Tribune*, p. 8). He then quoted President John F. Kennedy, who admonished his contemporaries to ask the following question: “First, were we truly men of courage—with the courage to stand up to one’s enemies—and the courage to stand up, when necessary, to one’s associates—the courage to resist public pressure as well as private greed?” (*The Speeches, Statements and Writings of John F. Kennedy*, p. 57).

A knowledge of medical science is less than effective if not grounded in a passion to help others. The practice and study of Buddhism will also fall short of its purpose without a strong intention to rescue people from suffering and bring them to happiness, and the courage to carry through with that intention when opposed.

There is a scene in the movie where Patch almost gives up his dream, discouraged by the untimely death of a friend. But those fellow students whom he had encouraged previously rally together to support him. This, I feel, is the very function of our organization: We are not super-heroes. We all have weaknesses, and at times lack courage. It is at those times that our good friends within SGI-USA, even those who have depended on us for inspiration, will serve to protect us—to give us courage.

Chanting daimoku to reach the heart of a suffering friend, engaging in the practice of Buddhist dialogue and studying the profound principles of this living philosophy—faith, practice and study—will help us bring forth the capacity to really help people.

I think the Patch Adams of real life must have found courage in his passion to help others, and in turn his courage allowed him to carry through with his dream of doing so. That courage allowed him to open up to people who were suffering, people who were even likely to resent his efforts.

What if we lack the desire or feel timid about talking to people—about encouraging or helping people? I once heard a leader say, “It’s all right if you don’t want to, but try to chant for the courage to want to.” In other words, once we decide on the path we wish to take in life, we can bring forth passion and courage through prayer. When we determine to help others, to contribute to enriching society, and pray to be able to do so, passion, compassion and courage are ours. Without this, our “basics” may lack a real basis: We could become like priests who actually believe that people should revere them while lacking the capacity or desire to revere people; or like doctors who are unable to feel or care about the suffering of their patients.

I am confident that when grounded in the basics of compassion and courage and expressed in prayer and dialogue, our faith, practice and study of Buddhism will form for us a solid foundation for a happy and fulfilling life.