

STUDY MATERIAL COMMENTARY

‘WHAT MATTERS IS ONE’S HEART’: SINCERITY IS A KEY TO HAPPINESS

A KEY to personal happiness is acting out of genuine sincerity for the happiness of others. Since Buddhism exists ultimately for people’s happiness, such altruism is the basis of our Buddhist practice. Nichiren Daishonin repeatedly stresses this in his writings. For example, describing the importance of sincerity, the Daishonin often uses the Japanese word *kokorozashi*, which can be translated as spirit, faith, heart or will, depending on the textual context, yet literally means “the orientation of one’s heart.” According to one calculation, he uses the word more than 160 times throughout his known writings. In “Letter to the Mother of Oto Gozen,” the Daishonin—using the same word, here translated as “seeking spirit”—states: “The length of the journey traveled in pursuit of the Law represents the strength of seeking spirit” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1223). The Daishonin praises the mother of Oto Gozen for her sincerity in having traveled a long distance to visit him in exile. In the same letter, the Daishonin tells her that because of such sincerity, she is “a woman who is certain to become a Buddha” (*ibid.*, p. 1222). Here the Daishonin stresses the sincerity of one’s heart as a decisive cause for enlightenment and happiness.

Elaborating on the practical meaning of the word *kokorozashi*, SGI President Daisaku Ikeda states that it “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 [i.e., *kokorozashi*] 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” (*Learning From the Gosho: The Eternal Teachings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 128). He also explains the word, which is here translated as “spirit,” as follows: “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” (*ibid.*, p. 129). President Ikeda reiterates the Daishonin’s emphasis on sincerity of spirit, expressed in prayer and action, as a key to one’s happiness.

SINCERITY, however, is an elusive concept. Simply doing nice things for others does not equate with sincerity. Some people seem to engage in actions that are selfless, yet are primarily motivated by selfish concerns. Seeming is different from being, and Buddhism is about being. When doing something for others, people often expect something in return, such as praise, recognition, money or love. Sometimes they become resentful when they do not get what they expected. In the worst case, what is expected far outweighs what is given.

One longtime SGI member related an experiment he conducted to test his own sincerity. He cleaned the kitchen and resolved not to say a word about it to anyone in his family. He was happy to see his wife and children pleased, but disappointed when none of them asked who had done it. He decided to remain silent, but by the end of the day, his patience ran out and he revealed his “big secret” to his family, who responded rather nonchalantly. He realized how difficult it is to give of oneself fully without expectation or seeking even a simple acknowledgment for what we do for others.

IN fact, it may well be impossible to be totally neutral to recognition or praise, or to divorce ourselves completely from self-concern. The Daishonin writes: “When praised, one does not consider his personal risk, and when criticized, he can recklessly cause his own ruin. Such is

the way of common mortals.” (MW-1, 92). In today’s world, most would agree that those who are at least as concerned about others’ well-being and happiness as they are about their own are sincere people. This is perhaps why the Daishonin responded to any show of sincerity with the utmost sincerity. Deeply appreciating the workings of the human heart, he never held back in expressing his praise and gratitude for each heartfelt gesture of support. In this sense, the Daishonin teaches us that to respect and appreciate others’ sincerity is itself sincerity.

True caring is essentially selfless; it is without affectation. But selflessness does not mean a lack of self-identity. Those lacking a strong self-identity sometimes devote themselves to others to fill a spiritual void or merely to feel needed. Sincerity is neither self-sacrifice nor self-disparagement. Sincere people are confident, regardless of what others may say; they seek reward for their efforts not in praise, recognition or profit, but in the joy of simply seeing others win and become happy. Such a genuine spirit gives rise to profound personal growth and enrichment.

For this reason, when the Daishonin sensed Oto Gozen’s mother’s great sincerity, he assured her that she would attain enlightenment. The mother traveled with her infant daughter for days and days over mountains and seas to visit her teacher in exile on a remote northern island. She made her trip with no expectation of reward; she was simply concerned about the Daishonin’s well-being and wished to offer any support she could provide. Her concern was never forced or demanded by anyone; it was spontaneous.

Unlike most priests of his day, who sought to profit from their parishes, the Daishonin never took believers’ sincerity for granted. Nor did he ever demand sincerity from them.

In the exchange between the Daishonin and the mother of Oto Gozen, we can see the importance of acting out of sincerity as well as of recognizing, appreciating and responding to others’ sincerity.

It is certainly easier to talk about sincerity than practice it. After all, it is easier to be motivated by self-interest than by altruism—real concern for others. Through our consistent practice of the Daishonin’s Buddhism, however, we steadily expand our lives’ capacity so that we may one day regard the happiness of others as our own and experience genuine richness in our lives.

WHENEVER we contribute to our Buddhist movement and for the happiness of others—whether it takes the form of a financial contribution to the SGI or driving a long distance to encourage fellow members—the true reward lies in our state of life. Our inner condition becomes refreshed and enriched the moment we take such altruistic action. We do not have to wait to reap the fruit of our good deeds. Nor do we have to frustrate ourselves wondering how much benefit we will receive when we do act (that is, there is no need to make a “deal” with the Gohonzon, such as “I’ll do this, if you give me that”).

To pray, ponder and move for the sake of people’s happiness is to awaken real sincerity. And engaging meaningfully in SGI activities while studying the Daishonin’s writings—into which he has infused his profound sincerity—provide a most excellent basis for doing this. This is what it means to live the Daishonin’s words, “What matters is one’s heart” (MW-5, 289). ◻

SGI-USA Study Department

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