

DIALOGUE ON THE LOTUS SUTRA

37 THOSE WHO SPREAD THE MYSTIC LAW ACCUMULATE THE GREAT LIFE FORCE

THE WISDOM OF THE LOTUS SUTRA—
A DISCUSSION ON RELIGION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

This is the thirty-seventh installment of an ongoing discussion on the Lotus Sutra among SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai Study Department Chief Katsuji Saito and Vice Chiefs Takanori Endo and Haruo Suda. It appeared in the February 1998 issue of The Daibyakurenge, the Soka Gakkai study journal.

How does our life change as we come to grips with the “Life Span” chapter’s teaching about the eternity of life? This time the participants discuss the “Distinctions in Benefits” (seventeenth) chapter, exploring what it means to lead a life of value creation—a life where one is able to transform life’s hardships into a source of value and benefit.

37 Those Who Spread the Mystic Law Accumulate the Great Life Force

**The Buddha preaches a rarely encountered Law,
one never heard from times past.
The World-Honored One possesses great powers
and his life span cannot be measured.
The countless sons of the Buddha,
hearing the World-Honored One make distinctions
and describe the benefits of the Law they will gain,
find their whole bodies filled with joy. (*The Lotus Sutra*, chapter 17,
p. 235)**

KATSUJI SAITO: It is now three years since we began our “journey” through the Lotus Sutra. The time has really flown by.

PRESIDENT IKEDA: You may feel it’s flown by, but doing this every month is wearing me out! But, since this undertaking is vital in paving the way for the century of life, let’s forge ahead and complete our quest.

IKEDA: We now come to three chapters that all contain the word benefit in their titles: “Distinctions in Benefits,” the seventeenth; “Benefits of Responding with Joy,” the eighteenth; and “Benefits of the Teacher of the Law,” the nineteenth. Each provides an explanation of the benefit of the Mystic Law. In particular, they describe the great benefit of spreading that Law, and the change and growth that one devoted to working for kosen-rufu experiences. In that sense, it is the members of the SGI who are truly living the teachings of these chapters. Let us proceed with that conviction.

To start with, what is the meaning of benefit?

HARUO SUDA: Basically, the term means gain. It also implies the Buddhist concept of the beneficial power to produce good fortune and merit. Beneficial power is action that creates happiness and good, while good fortune and merit are the effects produced by this power. Positive action, or making good causes, has intrinsic virtue that brings one good fortune and merit. In some cases, the term benefit is used to refer to this innate virtue of positive action.

We Accumulate Benefit Through Action

IKEDA: That's a pretty complicated explanation! The bottom line is, positive action has inherent benefit. Benefit is definitely not something that comes to us from the outside; rather, it wells forth from within our lives, manifested through our own actions. It gushes out like water rising from a spring. That's what benefit is.

TAKANORI ENDO: In other words, true benefit has nothing to do with pinning one's hopes on being favored by an external source, like some kind of windfall.

IKEDA: Nichiren Daishonin says that benefit arises through "purifying the six sense organs." The purification of the six senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch and mind is itself the purification of one's life. In other words, it is doing our human revolution and transforming our destiny.

[The section of the "Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings" (Ongi Kuden) dealing with the "Benefits of the Teacher of the Law" chapter says, "Benefit' means the result and recompense of purifying the six sense organs.... Benefit is attaining Buddhahood in one's present form and the purification of the six sense organs" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 762).]

Attaining Buddhahood, that is to say, doing one's human revolution, is the supreme benefit. All the so-called worldly benefits manifest as concrete proof of happiness to the extent that we have purified our lives; this is in accord with the principle of the oneness of life and environment.

SAITO: So, elevating our state of life is the foundation of all benefit.

IKEDA: Yes. When we change, we can, as the Daishonin says, "gather fortune from ten thousand miles afar" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 272).

President Toda often said, "Supposing the benefit I have received is comparable in size to this auditorium, then what you call benefit is only about the size of the tip of your little finger." Mr. Toda received enormous benefit as the result of his actions for the sake of the Law, enduring great persecution alongside his mentor Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, the founding president of the Soka Gakkai, and willingly accompanying him to prison in the struggle to promote kosen-rufu.

Nichiren Daishonin says, "The element *ku* [in the word *kudoku*, or benefit] means eliminating evil, while the element *doku* means producing good" (GZ, 762). Benefit in the Daishonin's Buddhism means getting rid of the fundamental darkness in one's life and bringing forth goodness. To manifest benefit we need to carry out the practice of propagating the Daishonin's teaching. Doing so means refuting the mistaken beliefs that cause people to suffer and enabling them instead to live based on the Mystic Law.

SAITO: Propagation is the action we take to "eliminate evil and produce good." Through carrying out this practice for others, we also manifest the same effect in our own life.

IKEDA: On the other hand, the Daishonin says, "Both master and disciple will surely fall into the hell of incessant suffering if they see enemies of the Lotus Sutra and fail to reproach them" (MW-1, 165). Sharing Buddhism with others is all-important.

The next three chapters that we will study mark the start of the transmission section¹ of the Lotus Sutra. Transmission, as the word implies, means propagation. In other words, the chapters after "Life Span"² explain the benefit of propagating the teaching. We can only become happy as much as we strive to help others become happy through faith in the Mystic Law. This is the concept of benefit in Buddhism.

Title: Dialogue On The Lotus Sutra (37)

Subject: Living Buddhism 04/99 v.99 n.4 p.30 LB9904p30

Author:

Keywords: Chapter Dialogue Eternal Fortune Life Lotus Span Study Sutra

ENDO: In terms of the mentor-disciple relationship, transmission is the work of the disciples. Therefore, from this chapter forward the focus will be on the efforts of the Buddha's disciples.

A Living Philosophy Must Address the Reality of Life

SUDA: Some mistakenly interpret the teaching of benefit as indicating a preoccupation with material gain, and on that account look upon Buddhism as an inferior religion. But the Buddhist doctrine of benefit has to do primarily with purifying and revolutionizing one's life.

IKEDA: Perhaps it would be more accurate to look at benefit in terms of value, or value creation. There are three kinds of value: beauty, gain and good.³ The opposites of these could be termed anti-values. Don't all people aim to bring value to their lives?

SUDA: Working, eating, reading books, trying to cure disease—all are attempts to acquire or create some kind of value.

IKEDA: Everyone seeks happiness, just as plants and trees instinctively grow toward the sun. We always strive for a better life. This is only natural. To ignore or lose such drive is to be as good as dead.

SAITO: Consciously or not, all people seek happiness, value and benefit. It seems to me that this is indisputable. It is from the standpoint of this truth that all theory and explanation must begin. Any philosophy not based on this premise is no more than dead theory that has no bearing on reality.

ENDO: Throughout the history of Buddhism, since the time of Shakyamuni, never has the idea of gain been rejected. All along, Buddhism has urged that people accumulate benefit.

The Buddhist term benefit is written in Japanese with two Chinese characters. The first can be interpreted as meaning happiness and the second as meaning gain.⁴

SUDA: Of course, benefit in Buddhism does not refer only to the kind of gain that is visible to the eye. But if Buddhism were to reject such gain altogether, however, it would be no more than an abstract doctrine divorced from actual life, an enervated religion lacking the power to help people realize concrete improvement in their lives.

Even Illusion Becomes Benefit

IKEDA: Many people certainly hold the bias that religion merely pertains to the subjective realm of life. But Buddhism is the law of life; it is a teaching for daily life.

Viewed subjectively, life is a matter of self—of how we experience our own existence. Viewed objectively, from the outside, it is a matter of how we live—our daily activities. It's neither entirely one nor the other. Partiality to the subjective view leads to an emphasis on the spiritual, while partiality to the objective view leads to an emphasis on the material.

Buddhism rejects bias toward either one of these extremes, enabling us to purify and strengthen our being while improving our daily lives. Put another way, through realizing improvement in daily life, we elevate our being.

For example, Buddhism speaks of attaining a state in which all our wishes are fulfilled. Wishes relate to the objective world. Being fulfilled means a sense of satisfaction experienced in the subjective realm. When these two are fused harmoniously, we attain the state of "fulfillment of all wishes"; this is a condition of happiness. That is how

President Toda framed the issue.

SUDA: This seems to suggest that even a person with few wishes can readily find fulfillment.

IKEDA: I think it was Socrates who said that having few desires is the path to happiness.

SAITO: It seems to me that practitioners of Hinayana Buddhism seek to attain happiness through the elimination of desire. By contrast, Mahayana Buddhism, and the Lotus Sutra in particular, teaches the principle that “earthly desires are enlightenment.” It imparts the wisdom that enables us to channel the life-energy of earthly desires in the direction of good rather than something destructive.

IKEDA: The Lotus Sutra teaches that we can make our entire being blaze with the strong desire to attain a great objective. It teaches not that we should suppress anger, for instance, but that anger has a role to play in fueling our efforts to battle iniquity.

The “Orally Transmitted Teachings” read, “In the ‘Distinctions in Benefits’ chapter...they [the bodhisattvas] then recognize that the earthly desires of the three poisons innate to living beings in each of the Ten Worlds are the benefit of the Mystic Law” (GZ, 799).

To urge people to discard the three poisons of greed, anger and foolishness from their lives would only breed hypocrisy. Besides, people who suppress their true feelings, who are content with being docile, powerless and merely swept along by outside influences, are perfect candidates to be taken advantage of and used by the negative forces rampant in the Latter Day of the Law.

The Daishonin, however, urges that we challenge evil with great indignation and passion. When we base ourselves on the Mystic Law, everything becomes a source of value creation. This is the philosophy of the Lotus Sutra.

Benefit, or gain, and loss are not exclusive to the realm of religion. All people’s lives are, in a way, a succession of instances of gain and loss, value and anti-value. In business, selling is gain or value. But if the goods are sold at too low a price, the business takes a loss. When a painter realizes his or her subjective desire to paint a wonderful masterpiece (i.e., create the value of “beauty”), a fusion of subject and object occurs, filling the person with a sense of happiness. And when the painting is purchased, gain is realized.

When we are able to create value, we feel happy. The purpose of the Lotus Sutra is to enable us to develop in our inner, or subjective, world the great life force to create value no matter what circumstances we may encounter in our outer, or objective, world. That’s what is the process called human revolution.

SUDA: That is true benefit.

IKEDA: Taking faith in the Daishonin’s Buddhism does not mean that all difficulties will disappear. Being alive means that we will have problems of one kind or another. But no matter what happens, it’s important that we remain firm in our hearts. The Mystic Law is the teaching of “earthly desires are enlightenment” and “the sufferings of birth and death are nirvana.”

As long as we have the spirit of faith to dedicate our lives to advancing kosen-rufu, everything that happens to us will become our benefit without fail. Though we may not realize it while it’s happening, gradually our lives enter a path where “all wishes are fulfilled” and we can honestly say, “Everything that I’ve gone through has really been for the best.” This said, let’s begin our study of these three chapters, starting with “Distinctions in Benefits.”

The “Benefit of the *Jigage*”

ENDO: This chapter describes how those who had heard the preaching of the preceding “Life Span” chapter received benefit of different kinds according to their state of life. This benefit is distinguished according to twelve different levels. That is why the chapter is called “Distinctions in Benefits.”

SAITO: The Daishonin calls this benefit collectively the “benefit of the *Jigage*.”⁵ In “Letter to Horen” he says:

But it is not for me to describe the blessings deriving from the *Jigage*. Rather I refer to the subsequent *Fumbetsu kudoku* [Distinctions in Benefits] chapter, which elaborates on them. It says that those persons who became Buddhas after hearing the *Jigage* are equal in number to the particles of dust in a minor world system or a major world system. (MW-7, 111)

IKEDA: We could discuss this from many different angles. But from the standpoint of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, listening to the preaching of the *Jigage* and becoming a Buddha is the benefit of worshipping the “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo Thus Come One.” This is the great benefit of revering the Gohonzon. It is the great benefit of believing and understanding that since the remote past our lives have been one and inseparable with the life of the “Buddha of time without beginning.”

SUDA: The “Distinctions in Benefits” chapter begins as follows: “At that time, when the great assembly heard the Buddha describe how his life span lasted such a very long number of kalpas, immeasurable, boundless asamkhyas of living beings gained a great many rich benefits” (LS17, 233).

ENDO: It explains the content of these “great many rich benefits” as follows:

**Some abide in the stage of no regression,
some have acquired dharanis,
some can speak pleasingly and without hindrance
or retain ten thousand, a million repetitions of the teachings.
Some bodhisattvas numerous as the dust particles
of a thousand major worlds
are all able to turn
the unregressing wheel of the Law.
Some bodhisattvas numerous as the dust particles
of a thousand intermediate worlds
are all able to turn
the pure wheel of the Law....
Thus when living beings
hear of the great length of the Buddha’s life,
they gain pure fruits and rewards
that are immeasurable and free of outflows. (LS17, 235–36)**

IKEDA: In this passage, Bodhisattva Maitreya (Jpn. Miroku) is summarizing and restating the benefit that Shakyamuni has described.

ENDO: Yes. Regarding the first of these benefits, that of abiding in the stage of no

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regression, “no regression” means not backsliding. In other words, it is to attain the state in which one can advance eternally, always realizing growth and improvement.

IKEDA: That’s right. It has often been said that not to advance or to struggle is to retreat. A person who attains the “stage of no regression” is already a winner.

SAITO: To “acquire dharanis,” here, means gaining the ability “to retain all that they hear” (LS17, 233–34).

IKEDA: The Daishonin says, “Few continue their faith in the face of great obstacles” (MW-1, 127). And “Foolish men are likely to forget the promises they have made when the crucial moment comes” (MW-2 [2nd ed.], 180). Essentially, taking faith in this sutra means attaining a state of life where one does not forget one’s promises. It means correctly remembering and putting into practice the teachings of the mentor.

The More We Speak, The More Powerful Our “Voice” Becomes

SUDA: To “speak pleasingly and without hindrance” is also expressed elsewhere as gaining “the eloquence that allows them to speak pleasingly and without hindrance” (LS17, 234). This is referring to the ability to freely explain the Law without impediment and in a manner that brings joy to listeners.

IKEDA: The Daishonin says, “The voice does the Buddha’s work” (GZ, 708). We have to use our voices. This means we must speak eloquently and intelligently. There may also be times when having the gift of gab is useful!

Of course, eloquence does not mean simply being long-winded. Sometimes just a few well-chosen words will suffice to deftly refute a misconception. Also, using our voice to do the Buddha’s work means being able to correctly respond to whatever it is that someone wants to know in the depths of their heart. If you yourself don’t know the answer, you can invite the person to join you in going to talk to someone who does. Sometimes that’s the best course to take.

What is important is to possess the ability to move people’s hearts and to empathize with them. In short, this is what it means to freely employ one’s voice for kosen-rufu.

SAITO: I think this certainly describes your efforts to write and to speak with people all over the world. Your published dialogues with people from all areas of society alone number approximately thirty.

IKEDA: What I have been able to accomplish is a testament to the immense power of Buddhism. The great power of the Mystic Law is still not fully understood.

The Spirit Never Rests

SUDA: Next, the sutra says the bodhisattvas can “retain ten thousand, a million repetitions of the teachings.” In the prose section it says they gain “dharanis that allow them to retain hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, millions, immeasurable repetitions of the teachings” (LS 17, 234). The expression used here literally means causing a collection of things of different weight to spin around, and separating them through centrifugal force. This seems to indicate the spiritual power to separate out and sublimate earthly desires by “rotating” them at a tremendous speed, and thereby revealing the greatness of the Buddha. The Sanskrit term *dharani* denotes the spiritual power to promote good and thwart evil.

IKEDA: As this passage implies by its description of things rotating at high velocity, to live a truly peaceful existence requires diligently and vigorously challenging the negative forces

that aim to cause suffering. The benefits enumerated next also contain the idea of rotation.

SUDA: Yes, the fifth kind of benefit is the ability to “turn the unregressing wheel of the Law.” And the sixth is the ability to “turn the pure wheel of the Law.” The phrase “wheel of the Law” comes from the fact that the Buddha, in expounding the Law, is metaphorically said to “turn the wheel” of teaching. I think these passages express an unceasing and dynamic faith—a faith dedicated to conveying the Buddha’s pure teaching to others and spreading it far and wide.

ENDO: The passage continues by saying that many bodhisattvas “are assured that after eight more rebirths they will be able to complete the Buddha way.”(LS17, 235) It further states that after four, three, two or one more rebirth, many bodhisattvas will attain the perfect and unsurpassed enlightenment. And it concludes the introduction of the benefit of listening to the “Life Span” chapter by declaring, “All [living beings] are endowed with good roots to help them set their minds on the unsurpassed way” (LS17, 237).

SAITO: The Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai of China categorizes these benefits according to the fifty-two stages of bodhisattva practice.⁶ The sutra describes various benefits that bodhisattvas receive. At first, it may seem to suggest that people can only receive benefit according to their specific level of attainment. But, contrary to that viewpoint, I think it actually reveals the great power of the “Life Span” chapter to benefit any and all people.

IKEDA: All benefit that can be attained through bodhisattva practice comes from faith in the “Life Span” chapter. That’s because those bodhisattvas who reach the stage of enlightenment almost equivalent to the Buddha’s when they hear the “Life Span” chapter simultaneously awaken to the Mystic Law of time without beginning. It is at that moment that they make the transition from the stage of common mortals who have just embraced the Lotus Sutra to that of the Buddha.

It is as though they are steadily climbing a mountain with their sights set on reaching the state of enlightenment, the life-state of the Buddha. But when they arrive at the top, at the summit of the “Life Span” chapter, what do they see, what kind of scene unfolds before them? They perceive that the true Buddha enlightened from time without beginning is constantly and tirelessly carrying out activities in the world to lead all beings to enlightenment. They understand that they themselves once received his instruction. And they realize that they themselves were originally united in a relation of mentor and disciple with the Buddha who is one with the universe.

In other words, they recollect the truth of their own lives, remembering where they had come from and where they are going, and envision their true identity. They recall their mission to ceaselessly work together with the eternal and fundamental Buddha to lead others to enlightenment.

Essentially, those bodhisattvas awaken to the truth that Buddhahood, or enlightenment, is certainly not a static goal. Embracing the Lotus Sutra itself is the way to enlightenment for ordinary people. To live with the original cause of Buddhahood as the center of one’s life and never stop progressing is to embody the life of the Buddha.

This is the conclusion of this sutra.

SAITO: This is not clearly stated on the surface of the “Life Span” chapter. But the teaching that the Buddha attained enlightenment in the extremely remote past, provides us with a clue that enables us to understand this.

SUDA: Shakyamuni explains that he attained enlightenment long ago in the remote past. Those in the assembly who hear this and consequently reach the stage of enlightenment almost equal to the Buddha understand that the Mystic Law from time without

beginning, the teaching by which Shakyamuni became enlightened, is itself the true cause for attaining Buddhahood.

ENDO: I think therefore that the fundamental teaching of the sutra is that the common mortals who embrace it instantly arrive at a state of enlightenment equal to that of Shakyamuni.

Celestial Bodies Exhibit a Wide Range of Aspects Upon Death

IKEDA: Those people return to the very core of their own lives. They understand that they are one with the single great living entity that is the entire universe.

This might seem like a digression, but I recently saw a number of pictures of dying stars released by the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).⁷

SUDA: Yes. The photographs were taken by the Hubble Space Telescope. Interestingly, the stars exhibited a variety of different shapes: “sphere-shaped,” “balloon-shaped,” “sprinkler-shaped,” “butterfly-shaped,” “rocket engine exhaust-shaped” and “pinwheel-shaped.”

ENDO: Stars also go through the cycle of birth and death.

IKEDA: It seems that stars exhibit different kinds of death depending on their mass. Many stars of approximately the same mass as our sun burn out completely in the final stage and, while slowly emitting gas, eventually become dim stars known as white dwarfs.

SAITO: Among people, too, there are those who completely “burn out” and quietly fade away!

IKEDA: On the other hand, a star of several times the mass of the sun will produce a brilliant explosion on death.

SAITO: Such an explosion is termed a supernova.

IKEDA: That’s right. In his *Meigetsuki* (Bright Moon Diary), Japanese literary figure Fujiwara no Teika (1162–1241) discusses the great supernova that created what today we call the Crab Nebula. On the Western calendar, that was in the year 1054, during the latter half of Japan’s Heian Period (794–1185).

ENDO: That’s just two years after 1052, the date traditionally taken to mark the start of the Latter Day of the Law.

SUDA: After eruption, the luminosity of a supernova suddenly increases millions of times its normal level. Some are so brilliant that they can be seen with the naked eye even in daylight. They also grow dim in time.

IKEDA: The supernova that appeared in 1054 was recorded by astronomers in China and Arabia. And line drawings were found in caves in North America that seem to record the same event.

ENDO: How far do you think the Crab Nebula is from Earth?

SUDA: I understand that it’s about 7,200 light years away.

ENDO: For the death of a star so remote to have caused such a stir on Earth means it must have been an exhibition of enormous energy—a truly remarkable event!

SUDA: There are no doubt people who aspire to go out in such a blaze of glory!

SAITO: From the photos recently released, I was intrigued by the finding that stars in the same class as our sun seem to undergo many kinds of death.

IKEDA: Everything in the universe is alive. Everything is an entity of life and death, an entity of the Mystic Law.

Even if we only look at the material aspect, matter that is scattered throughout the universe as a result of the death of a star will be used in the birth of new stars and in the bod-

ies of biological organisms. It may be that the atoms making up our bodies, too, were once shining as part of a star somewhere.

Human beings are children of the stars, of the universe. Our lives are one with the great life of the universe. The benefit of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is literally the benefit of the entire universe. It is inexhaustible. Limitless.

The “Distinctions in Benefits” chapter says, “He will gain immeasurable merits, boundless as the open air” (LS17, 243).

And:

Their virtue will be uppermost, immeasurable and boundless, as the open sky, east, west, north and south, in the four intermediate directions and up and down, is immeasurable and boundless. The blessings of such persons will be as immeasurable and boundless as this.” (LS17, 241)

Attaining a State of Life in Which All Wishes Are Fulfilled

IKEDA: The benefit of the Gohonzon is infinite and boundless, and is therefore impossible to thoroughly explain.

In his commentary on Nichiren Daishonin’s “The True Object of Worship,” Nichikan, the twenty-sixth high priest, says: “[If you have faith in this Gohonzon and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo even for a short while] no prayer will go unanswered, no offense unexpiated, no good fortune unbestowed, and all righteousness proven.”⁸ Such absolute conviction contains all the benefits of the four stages of faith and five stages of practice⁹ described in the “Distinctions in Benefits” chapter.

As long as we have faith, there is no difficulty we cannot overcome. The great life force of the lion king wells up in our lives, the Daishonin’s boundless spirit comes pouring out. The “Distinctions in Benefits” chapter describes the practitioners of the sutra as “roaring like a lion” (LS17, 239) in the same manner as the Buddha.

SAITO: Those who hear of and believe in the unfathomable life span of the Buddha state the following pledge upon accepting the Lotus Sutra:

**Our wish is that in future ages
we may use our long lives to save living beings.
Just as today the World-Honored One,
king of the Shakyas,
roars like a lion in the place of practice,
preaching the Law without fear,
so may we too in ages to come,
honored and revered by all,
when we sit in the place of practice
describe our life span in the same manner. (LS17, 239)**

IKEDA: “Long lives” here means living with the unsurpassed life of the Mystic Law. The Chinese term for lion comprises two elements: the first means teacher or mentor, and the second disciple. “Roars like a lion” refers to the oneness of mentor and disciple where mentor and disciple call out in unison. This is the true meaning of propagation.

Early on in my practice, I made the determination: “President Toda is the mentor of

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propagation in the Latter Day, and I am his disciple. Therefore, it is impossible that I should be unable to propagate Nichiren Daishonin's teaching." With that resolve, I accomplished propagation of the Daishonin's teaching second to none.

The chapter says that the disciples are "without fear." We should never be afraid. We need not be fearful, or complain or lament our situation. Rather, we must have bright, vital faith. Then the limitless beneficial power of the Mystic Law will flow through our lives.

All along, I have continued to spread the Daishonin's teaching and protect the Soka Gakkai while enduring all manner of persecution and overcoming all kinds of obstacles. As a result, I have received truly immense benefit from my practice to the Gohonzon.

Although we are all chanting to the same Gohonzon, if our faith is weak, we will not savor the truly great joy of faith pouring out of our lives. The benefit that we receive differs depending on our faith. Each person's benefit is unique and different. This is the meaning of "distinctions in benefits."

Again, while the manner in which benefit manifests differs for each person depending on their faith, life-condition and karma, as long as we persevere in faith, in the end we are sure to attain the state "in which all wishes are fulfilled." This is the profound meaning of "distinctions in benefits."

For example, while we should of course exercise care to avoid accidents, the Daishonin teaches that even if we should die in an unfortunate accident, as long as we have embraced strong faith, then "in the space of a moment" (GZ, 574) we will return to the ranks of those working for kosen-rufu.

A passage from the Nirvana Sutra cited in his writings says, "Even if you are killed by a mad elephant, you will not fall into the three evil paths. But if you are killed by an evil friend, you are certain to fall into them" (MW-5, 168). In modern terms, to be "killed by a mad elephant" would be comparable to dying in a traffic accident.

Those who die in the course of carrying out activities for kosen-rufu cannot fail to receive great effects from their faith. The Daishonin makes this clear in such writings as "Lessening One's Karmic Retribution." This sort of death literally exemplifies the principle of giving one's life for the sake of the Law. This is the most noble way to die.

A Sense of Calm and Security at the Moment of Death

SAITO: A little earlier it was mentioned that dying stars exhibit a variety of different aspects. The same is true of people's deaths.

Akiko Kojima, the secretary of the Soka Gakkai nurses group, expressed to me her belief that the view of life and death that we hold while alive is a very important factor in determining our final moments. But if it is only a matter of theory and knowledge, she says, it will count for absolutely nothing when that moment comes. Ms. Kojima further remarked that under the assault of the three poisons of greed, anger and stupidity that come spewing forth at the time of death, unless one feels true calm and security in the depths of one's heart, one cannot weather the ordeal.

Naturally, status and wealth are irrelevant; nor do leadership positions in the organization count for anything at the time of death. Ms. Kojima says that, even if a leader goes to extreme lengths to conceal his or her pain out of a sense of responsibility, one cannot hide one's suffering at the moment of death.

ENDO: There was a men's division member who until the moment he passed away never ceased encouraging those who came to visit him. As the end approached, his wife,

who had looked after him throughout the course of his illness, began crying. Noticing this, he turned to her and said, “There’s no need to cry,” adding, “I think that this is the end. Please convey my thanks to all of the nurses for their hard work.” He died encouraging his wife to the very end.

SUDA: I also heard the story of a women’s division member whom the nurses would later compare to a “marshmallow.” The reason they said this was that each nurse who attended her felt as though she were being gently embraced in a soft marshmallow. The woman possessed abundant warmth and concern for others. And to the very last she continued to bring joy to those around her with her magnanimous spirit.

IKEDA: That is the life of a bodhisattva. No, of a Buddha. Not only do such people strive to revolutionize their own state of life, but they constantly make efforts to elevate the state of life of those around them to the very end.

SAITO: The “Distinctions in Benefits” chapter describes the benefit that accrues to those who understand the importance of the long duration of the Buddha’s life span, that is to say, the benefit of awakening to the eternity of life. This probably manifests in their appearance at the time of death.

IKEDA: Yes. This is not mere theorizing divorced from reality. We must live earnestly, always moving forward energetically, proud to be able to experience complete fulfillment in both life and death. Buddhism was expounded to enable us to manifest such great life force.

The “Distinctions in Benefits” chapter in one place speaks of people who are “diligent and courageous, mastering all the good doctrines, keen in faculties and wisdom, good at answering difficult questions” (LS17, 242). Diligent and courageous—doesn’t this describe SGI members?

A Life of Struggle to the Finish

SUDA: Ms. Kojima, whom I mentioned a little earlier, told me that she had one patient who impressed her more than any other. That patient, a men’s division member, died of cancer. But no matter how dire his situation became in the course of his illness, he maintained a fighting spirit to the very last.

Even when he was receiving treatment, and even when he was experiencing the most pain, his will to fight never abated. He would tell his doctors and nurses exactly how he felt and discuss methods of treatment with them, all the while challenging his situation with every ounce of his energy.

Ms. Kojima says that his eyes left the strongest impression on her. She describes them as the eyes of a master swordsman. At one point in his treatment he made a recovery and was discharged from the hospital, only to be hospitalized again when the cancer recurred. But even at that time, she reports, his “swordsman’s eyes” glowed with the same unshakable determination. She also relates feeling that even though his body was being devoured by cancer, his life itself continued to burn as strongly as ever.

IKEDA: To live vigorously through every ordeal is proof that someone understands the eternity of life. Eternal life is not something that we can verify with our eyes, but it is something that we can believe in.

SAITO: The Lotus Sutra repeatedly emphasizes the importance of belief.

IKEDA: Belief means basing one’s entire life on the Law. It is the state where our actions themselves manifest faith. This is true of propagation and of encouraging friends. By

struggling to communicate an understanding of the Mystic Law to someone, we polish our own life. And a life that has been thoroughly polished can soar freely throughout the three existences of past, present and future.

Without our even realizing it, we attain a state of eternal freedom. Like a rocket that can traverse the universe, our lives store up an inexhaustible supply of energy. We develop the great life force of the lion king. That is the benefit of the “Life Span of the Thus Come One” chapter.

SAITO: I am reminded of the benefit described in “Distinctions in Benefits” of gaining the “truth of birthlessness” (LS17, 233). Similar to the benefit of “abiding in the stage of no regression” that we talked about earlier, this indicates a state of confidence that there is neither birth nor death, that, in other words, life is eternal. It basically affirms that all phenomena are free from birth and death.

IKEDA: Our lives are one with the eternal Buddha. The Buddha is none other than our own lives. When we have this great confidence, we will definitely never become deadlocked. We can advance limitlessly, overcoming all suffering, all sadness, all inertia. We attain a calm state of no regression.

ENDO: That is a life imbued with the optimism of Buddhism.

IKEDA: Buddhist optimism is not the escapist optimism of those who throw up their hands and say, “Somehow or other things will work out.” Rather it means clearly recognizing evil as evil and suffering as suffering, and resolutely fighting to overcome it. It means believing in one’s own ability and strength to struggle against any evil or any obstacle. It is “fighting optimism.”

Speaking of optimism, I remember the smiling face of Dr. Norman Cousins, who was known as the “conscience of America.” Although he did not practice Buddhism, in his belief in the power of the human being he was no different from a Buddhist. Dr. Cousins once wrote:

No one need fear death. We need fear only that we may die without having known our greatest power—the power of his free will to give his life for others. If something comes to life in others because of us, then we have made an approach to immortality.¹⁰

When we devote ourselves to the happiness of others, when we undertake the struggle of a bodhisattva of our own free will, the immense force of life without beginning or end wells up in our being. The eternal life of the Buddha permeates our being like a rising tide. Then, there is no way that we cannot dramatically change our lives for the better.

In that sense, being able to chant daimoku, to spread the Daishonin’s teaching, and to work for kosen-rufu—that in itself is the greatest benefit. The Daishonin states, “There is no greater happiness for human beings than chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo” (MW-1, 161). This plainly indicates that a life dedicated to kosen-rufu is most noble and lofty. The “Distinctions in Benefits” chapter imparts the wisdom to recognize this.

To be continued

1. Transmission section: One of the three divisions of a sutra, together with preparation and revelation. The preparation section explains the reason a sutra is being expound-

Title: Dialogue On The Lotus Sutra (37)

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Author:

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- ed. The revelation section constitutes the main body of the teaching. And the transmission section is the concluding part where the benefit of the sutra is set forth and its transmission to future generations is urged.
2. Strictly speaking, the first half of the “Distinctions in Benefits” chapter belongs to the “revelation” section of the essential teaching, along with the latter half of “Emerging from the Earth,” the fifteenth chapter, and the “Life Span” chapter in its entirety. This portion of the sutra is referred to collectively as the “one chapter and two halves.”
 3. Beauty, gain and good: In his theory of value, the first Soka Gakkai president, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, argued that these constitute the core values, in contrast to the traditional values of truth, good and beauty.
 4. “The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings” says, “‘ku’ means ‘happiness’” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 762). The *Shoman Hokutsu** says, “‘toku (doku)’ means ‘gain.’” (**Shoman Hokutsu*: A commentary on the Shrimala Sutra by Chi-tsang [Jpn. Kichizo, 549–623], a priest of the San-lun [Jp. Sanron] school of China.)
 5. *Jigage*: The verse section that concludes the “Life Span” chapter.
 6. Fifty-two stages of bodhisattva practice: Progressive stages through which a bodhisattva is said to advance, from the time of his first resolve until he finally attains Buddhahood. They consist of ten stages of faith, ten stages of security, ten stages of practice, ten stages of devotion, ten stages of development, a stage almost equal to enlightenment (*togaku*) and enlightenment (*myogaku*).
 7. NASA press release, December 17, 1997.
 8. *Fujishugaku Yoshu* (Essential Writings of the Fuji School), ed. Hori Nichiko (Tokyo: Seikyo Shimbunsha, 1978), vol. 4, p. 213.
 9. The four stages of faith are: (1) to produce even a single moment of faith in the sutra; (2) to understand the Buddhas’ teaching in the sutra; (3) to propagate this teaching widely to others; and (4) to realize the truth expounded by the Buddha with deep faith. The five stages of practice are: (1) to rejoice on hearing the Lotus Sutra; (2) to read and recite the sutra; (3) to propagate the sutra to others; (4) to practice the six paramitas while embracing the Lotus Sutra; and (5) to perfect the six paramitas.
 10. Norman Cousins, *Human Options* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1981), p. 45.

From the “Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings”

Those [bodhisattvas] who had heard in the prior [“Life Span”] chapter about the Buddha’s true identity as the Thus Come One inherently endowed with the three enlightened properties whose life is eternal, themselves come to believe in and understand the “inherent three enlightened properties.” The [“Distinctions in Benefit”] chapter clarifies the benefit that these bodhisattvas accrue through their belief and understanding.

In other words, when they believe and understand the inherent three enlightened properties, they then recognize that the earthly desires of the three poisons innate to living beings in each of the ten worlds are the benefit of the Mystic Law. The benefit is that they awaken to the fact that their own life is inherently an entity of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. (GZ, 799)

Purifying Our Six Senses

FROM one perspective, what we call benefit in Buddhism comes from the positive relationships we create with our environment and with the people and events we encounter in life. To create such relationships, we must perceive things correctly so that we may act wisely. If our perception and grasp of our surroundings is clear, we can exercise wisdom and create positive value, happiness and joy.

But if our perception is clouded, we are more likely to bring suffering upon ourselves. This is why Nichiren Daishonin states: “Benefit’ means the result and recompense of purifying the six sense organs.... Benefit is attaining Buddhahood in one’s present form and the purification of the six sense organs” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 762).

When we clearly perceive the positive meaning in our experiences, even in unpleasant ones such as unemployment, divorce or sickness, we can find hope and use any experience as an impetus for growth. In other words, how we perceive things determines largely whether we create happiness or suffering in our lives. This is why Buddhism emphasizes “the purification of the six senses.”

“Purifying the six senses,” however, does not mean that we eliminate what Buddhism regards as life’s impurities: greed, anger, foolishness, arrogance and doubt. These so-called earthly desires are always a part of us, as is our Buddhahood. When we practice the Daishonin’s Buddhism, we activate our inner state of Buddhahood, which imbues our lives with the strength and wisdom not to allow these “impurities” to influence our decisions and actions. We no longer see things through an impure or tainted “lens.”

And from this enlightened perspective, we begin to recognize our own “impurities” and how they cause us to suffer. The wisdom of Buddhahood can even cause these impure qualities to function in a positive way. It can transform greed, for example, into a strong desire for happiness for self and others; anger can become a strong sense of justice; foolishness, spontaneity; arrogance, tenacity; and doubt, a healthy skepticism or sense of inquiry.

Some may equate purity with innocence and innocence with ignorance. But the Buddhist view of being “pure” is to have total self-knowledge; it is an ability to see ourselves clearly for what we are and remain uninfluenced by our innate negativity. This is why the Daishonin states: “Among those who wish to become Buddhas through attempting to eradicate earthly desires and shunning the lower nine worlds, there is not one ordinary person who actually attained enlightenment” (GZ, 403).

In this sense, the illusion of imagining oneself to be a person devoid of the potential for greed, anger, foolishness, arrogance and doubt is itself a great “impurity.” So the aim of Buddhism is to enable us take off those tainted glasses and see ourselves and what is around us in the light of truth. We may not like everything we see, but clearly perceiving reality by “purifying the six senses” is a first important step toward true happiness.