

## STUDY MATERIAL FOR MAY • JUNE “LETTER TO LORD TOKI”

*The following text of Nichiren Daishonin’s “Letter to Lord Toki” and accompanying commentary are taken from SGI President Ikeda’s book, Learning From the Goshō: The Eternal Teachings of Nichiren Daishonin, pp. 143–53.*

**I HAVE received one unlined kimono. Among the Buddha’s disciples there was one monk who, when the Buddha was in a place where there was famine and was restricted in his activities because of the shortages, sold his clerical robes and gave the money that he received to the Buddha.**

**The Buddha asked him where the money had come from. So the monk told him how he had acquired it, relating everything exactly as it had happened.**

**The Buddha then declined the offering, saying: “The surplice is the Dharma robe for the enlightenment of all Buddhas over the three existences. I do not have the power to requite such an offering.” So the monk asked, “Then what should I do with the money that I received for my surplice?” In response, the Buddha asked him, “Do you have a dear mother?” When the monk replied that he did, the Buddha told him, “You ought to offer this money from the surplice to your mother.”**

**The monk then said to Shakyamuni: “The Buddha is the most venerable being in the threefold world. He is the eye of all living beings. Even if it were a robe broad enough to wrap in itself the entire universe, or a surplice large enough to cover the earth, the Buddha is certainly worthy of such an offering. My mother is as ignorant as a cow and more thoughtless than a sheep. How could she possibly be worthy of the offering of a surplice?”**

**The Buddha replied: “Who gave birth to you? Your mother did. Doesn’t she therefore fully deserve to receive the offering of this surplice?”**

**This unlined kimono was a present given by a merciful mother, more than 90 years old, to you, her beloved son [Toki Jonin]. She must have strained her eyes and expended her life to make it.**

**As the son, you must have sent it to me knowing that it would be difficult for you to repay the debt for this robe. And it will also be difficult for me, Nichiren, to repay it. Even so, I do not think it would be proper for me to return it.**

**That’s because if I wear this robe and report these matters in detail before the god of the sun, then they will without fail be known to Taishaku, Bonten and all the Buddhist gods. It is but one robe, but all heavenly deities throughout the universe will surely acknowledge your meritorious conduct. Like dew joining the ocean, or soil being added to the earth, your good fortune will not be lost in lifetime after**

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**lifetime, nor decay in world after world.  
With my deep respect,  
Nichiren  
The fifth day of the second month (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 968)**

**Noblest Are Those Who Love Humanity**

Shakyamuni Buddha was a traveler. Throughout his life, he was continually active and on the move.

“I will visit that place—for there are people there.” Spurring himself to action, he walked on, his gaze fixed on the distant horizon. Shakyamuni sincerely loved human beings.

As he made his way through each place, he must have thoroughly enjoyed encountering new friends and discovering new qualities and virtues in old friends. Transcending all superficial differences, he drew out each person’s goodwill and created heart-to-heart bonds of benevolence. Weaving such a spiritual fabric was undoubtedly his greatest joy. His spirit was that of a true champion of humanism.

A Buddhist text relates how Shakyamuni once came upon an abandoned sick man. Shakyamuni would not forsake him. He approached the man, who was filthy, and warmly comforted him. Helping him up, Shakyamuni led him outdoors and washed him. While the man was bathing, Shakyamuni even changed his bedding. Those observing this wondered why the Buddha was going to such lengths for the sick man. “If you wish to serve the Buddha,” Shakyamuni told them, “then you should tend to the sick.”<sup>1</sup> This is a well-known anecdote.

Sickness is not merely a physical phenomenon; it invariably signals the presence of spiritual malady, too. In seeking to cure someone’s illness, we should spare no effort, leave no stone unturned. In the above instance, Shakyamuni’s intention was probably to indicate that the path of Buddhism lies solely in working for and taking action among people.

Because Shakyamuni loved people, many gathered around him, drawn by his thoroughly humane conduct. And, naturally, the atmosphere around him was always lively and bright. The same was true of Nichiren Daishonin. In his presence, people doubtless felt free to voice their innermost thoughts and feelings.

The Daishonin was of course a strict mentor and teacher. But at the same time, from his many letters, we can see that people felt absolute assurance in confiding in him. He knew everything about them.

In the Daishonin’s presence, even adults would become as honest and open as children. Almost without realizing it, they would reveal their genuine, unaffected selves, their true faces.

Toki Jonin was one such follower. From the Daishonin’s letters to him, we can infer that Toki Jonin must have been very concerned about his mother. And the Daishonin respected and treasured his feelings. He gave him the support and encouragement he needed to conduct himself with true filial devotion toward his mother.

In the letter we are studying this time,<sup>2</sup> we can sense the Daishonin’s immense spirit of love and humanity.

**Among the Buddha’s disciples there was one monk who, when the Buddha was in a place where there was famine and was restricted in his activities because of the shortages, sold his clerical robes and gave the**

**money that he received to the Buddha....**

**The Buddha replied: “Who gave birth to you? Your mother did. Doesn’t she therefore fully deserve to receive the offering of this surplice?” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 968)**

This episode vividly conveys the humanism of Buddhism. It portrays the spirit of a disciple who wants to assist his mentor, and the concern of the mentor for the disciple as well as the disciple’s mother. It is a beautiful story.

It may be that, by rights, a monk was not supposed to sell his clerical robes under any circumstances. Still, the disciple took this action to support his mentor, even if it meant being reprimanded. While fully appreciating the spirit of his disciple, the Buddha tells him in effect: “I am not worthy to receive this precious offering. And, there is someone more suitable than I: that is your mother.

“Is there anyone more noble than your mother? You are carrying out Buddhist practice and will eventually become a Buddha. Therefore, to treasure the mother who gave you birth is itself Buddhism.” Buddhism teaches such true filial virtue.

Elsewhere, the Daishonin tells another major disciple, Nanjo Tokimitsu:

One’s debt to his or her father is so great as to make Mount Sumeru appear small. One’s debt to his or her mother is so profound as to make even the ocean seem shallow. You should set your mind on repaying your debt of gratitude to your father and mother. (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1527)

I am reminded here of President Toda’s “Precepts for Youth.” Mr. Toda cried out to youth: “Stand tall! Join the battle with me!”:

We must fight with love for the people. Today, there are many youth who don’t even love their parents, so how can they love others? Our struggle is for human revolution—to surmount our lack of compassion and develop in ourselves the mercy of the Buddha.<sup>3</sup>

President Toda was very strict with young people who were disrespectful toward their parents.

Shakyamuni cherished the image he had of his mother (who is said to have died when he was seven days old) and treasured his adoptive mother. The Daishonin also treasured his mother and successfully prayed for her life to be extended when she was ill.

In the above passage, the mentor teaches a disciple who thinks his mother is ignorant and worthless that this is far from the case.

The noblest person in the world is the one with the greatest love for the people. A truly wise person is not someone who orders others to treat him or her deferentially, but someone who teaches through words and actions that each person, as well as that person’s mother, is vitally important. The disciple here, suddenly grasping the immense warmth of his mentor’s spirit, must have felt he was gazing upon the sun’s brilliance.

The heart of one person moves that of another. A Greek philosopher teaches that hatred of language and ideas leads to hatred of humanity.<sup>4</sup> If your heart is closed, then the doors to other people’s hearts will also shut tight. On the other hand, someone who makes all those around him or her into allies, bathing them in the sunlight of spring, as it were, will

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be treasured by all.

A Buddhist's way of life has to embody such clear and natural reasoning. The Buddha transmits the heart's sunlight universally to all beings.

Even though we strive to treat everyone with love and compassion, since we are ordinary people, it is only natural that we will have likes and dislikes. There is no need for us to struggle to make ourselves fond of people we find disagreeable. In our work as emissaries of the Buddha, however, we must not let our thoughts or actions be colored by any discrimination or favoritism.

Through offering sincere prayer and conducting earnest dialogue, all of you are working to open the lives of people whose hearts are closed tight like clams. Your actions are noble.

Why do you suppose the Daishonin brings up this episode to Toki Jonin, devoting two-thirds of this short letter to it? The reason becomes clear as we keep reading.

### No Effort Is Wasted

**This unlined kimono was a present given by a merciful mother, more than 90 years old, to you, her beloved son [Toki Jonin]. She must have strained her eyes and expended her life to make it....**

**Like dew joining the ocean, or soil being added to the earth, your good fortune will not be lost in lifetime after lifetime, nor decay in world after world.**

**With my deep respect,**

**Nichiren**

**The fifth day of the second month**

**(*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 968)**

When the Daishonin saw the robe that Lord Toki had sent, he must have fondly recalled the face of his follower's mother. The Daishonin is said to have spent time at Toki Jonin's manor after the Matsubagayatsu Persecution in 1260. Probably he had grown close to Lord Toki's mother.

More than ten years had passed since then. In those days, a person over 90 would have been extremely long-lived. The Daishonin must have been concerned about how difficult needlework would have been for Toki Jonin's mother. His sentiments are expressed in the sentence, "She must have strained her eyes and expended her life to make it."

Toki Jonin was 60 at the time. But even after reaching an advanced age, the parent, as they say, is still the parent and the child is still the child. Toki Jonin no doubt wondered how he could reply to his mother's warm consideration.

"That's it," he probably thought, "I'll offer the robe to the Daishonin. Both he and my mother will be pleased." While there is no way of knowing whether this was his intent, the unlined kimono was delivered to the Daishonin.

The Daishonin's sense of gratitude may well have been accompanied by some hesitation. He couldn't nonchalantly accept an item that was invested with such profound love. The tale that the Daishonin relates in this reply sheds light on his feelings.

Although he was reluctant to accept the garment, to return it would amount to rejecting the sincere spirit with which it had been offered. Under the circumstances, the Daishonin acknowledges Toki Jonin's sincerity and conveys the greatest thanks and encouragement to the latter's mother.

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The Daishonin says that by wearing this robe, Bonten, Taishaku and all heavenly deities would know the ardent spirit of mother and son in making the offering. He says that the Buddhist gods in the ten directions would definitely protect them. And he concludes the letter telling them that their benefit in making such an offering would illuminate their lives in lifetime after lifetime, eternally.

What joy the mother and son must have felt on receiving this response! Toki Jonin, in his joy at conducting himself in the most dutiful manner toward his mother, must have felt the deepest gratitude to the Daishonin.

“What matters is one’s heart” (MW-5, 289). Here we see a beautiful exchange take place: a mother who undertakes painstaking effort out of concern for her son; a disciple who is motivated by concern for his mother and his mentor; and the mentor who, out of his concern for the mother and son, does his utmost to bring out the best in all their efforts. This is the world of Buddhism.

The year after this letter was sent, in February 1276, Toki Jonin’s mother died as Jonin, his wife and other relatives watched over her. According to one account, she was 93 when she died.

Toki Jonin held an important position in society [as a vassal of Lord Chiba, governor of Shimosa province (present-day Chiba Prefecture), with a rank comparable to that of a steward] and was also a central figure among the Daishonin’s followers.

Toki Jonin’s wife also looked after his mother attentively.

One of his mother’s grandchildren struggled for kosen-rufu at the Daishonin’s side, and later two of her grandchildren were active under Nikko Shonin. Embraced by the mercy of the original Buddha, the life of Toki Jonin’s mother was surely one of great satisfaction and victory. It was the drama of a woman who, though ordinary and without any special distinction, lived earnestly and realized victory. Buddhism exists to help such valiant individuals become happy.

When we base our lives on the great wish for kosen-rufu, regarding each effort “like dew entering the ocean, or soil being added to the earth,” then our petty lesser selves give way to the greater self that shines with eternal victory. Our every effort turns into an ocean of benefit, an earth of good fortune.

I hope each of you will be confident that—just as Nichiren Daishonin promises—you have already entered this path. And that, therefore, you will treasure your heart of faith.

“Letter to Lord Toki,” while short, is pervaded with warmth. In it, we glimpse a warm heart-to-heart exchange between Nichiren Daishonin and his followers. Because of their bond with the Daishonin and the sense of inner security that this brought, his followers could endure ordeals and struggle for kosen-rufu with all their might.

“How can I help others experience joy? How can I help them practice in high spirits and exert themselves?” It goes without saying that someone who gives no thought to these questions and does not respond to members’ needs is not qualified to be a leader in the humane world of Buddhism.

Our practice has to be based on strong prayer for the happiness of each person. Donning Toki Jonin’s robe, which was imbued with sincerity, the Daishonin, too, prayed to the Buddhist gods.

When we sincerely pray, without fail the Buddha wisdom to know how to encourage others will well forth. Our movement of kosen-rufu is to expand this world of encouragement.

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1. *Vinaya-pitaka*: One section of the *tripitaka*, a collection of treatises on discipline.
2. “Toki Dono Gohenji” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 968), written in February 1275 when the Daishonin was 54.
3. *Toda Josei Zenshu* (Collected Works of Josei Toda), vol. 1, pp. 59–60.
4. Plato, “Phaedo” in *The Portable Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, ed. Scott Buchanan (New York: Viking Press, 1973), p. 238.

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