

**THE COURAGE TO RESPECT ALL PEOPLE:
LEARNING FROM BODHISATTVA NEVER DISPARAGING
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Introduction

“I would never dare disparage you, for you are all certain to attain Buddhahood!” (The Lotus Sutra, trans. Burton Watson, p. 267). With these words, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging (Jpn Fukyo) goes among the people, trying to awaken them to their innate potential for enlightenment. In return, he is met with hostility and abuse, both verbal and physical. In spite of this, however, the bodhisattva perseveres in his practice of showing respect to all people. He eventually attains enlightenment, not only for himself, but also leading everyone he has come in contact with toward happiness.

As we live in society where intolerance and abuse are increasingly the norm, the behavior of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, described in the Lotus Sutra, offers a concrete guide for our daily living. How can we develop our humanity in an increasingly inhuman society? How can we respond to and transform a hostile environment? The “Bodhisattva Never Disparaging” chapter of the Lotus Sutra sheds light on these important questions.

Background: The “heart” of our Buddhist practice

The Lotus Sutra’s twentieth chapter, titled “Bodhisattva Never Disparaging,” is in the closing section of the Lotus Sutra, known as the “transmission” portion. Sutras are often interpreted as having three parts: preparation, revelation and transmission. Preparation points to the introductory passages in which the reason for expounding the sutra is clarified. Revelation is the discussion of the sutra’s main teaching. Transmission, the concluding portion, explains the benefit of the sutra and encourages its transmission into the future. The Lotus Sutra’s transmission section is said to begin with the latter half of the “Distinction in Benefits” (17th) chapter and extend through the last chapter “Encouragements of the Bodhisattva Universal Worthy” (28th), and through the Sutra of Meditation of Bodhisattva Universal Worthy, which is considered an epilogue to the Lotus Sutra. A part of the sutra’s transmission section, the “Bodhisattva Never Disparaging” chapter explains both the benefit that accrues from spreading the Lotus Sutra and the retribution that befalls those who abuse its practitioners.

The significance of the “Bodhisattva Never Disparaging” chapter, however, lies not merely in its belonging to the sutra’s transmission section. Its portrayal of the attitude and behavior of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging contains the chapter’s real message in that these serve as a model for practitioners of the Lotus Sutra. His spirit and actions embody the essence of the sutra—humanism based on an absolute respect for the inherent dignity of all people. In this regard, Nichiren Daishonin explains: “The heart of the Buddha’s lifetime of teachings is the Lotus Sutra, and the heart of the practice of the Lotus Sutra is expounded in the *Fukyo* [“Never Disparaging”] chapter. What does Bodhisattva Fukyo’s profound respect for people signify? The real meaning of Shakyamuni Buddha’s appearance in this world lay in his behavior as a human being. How profound!” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 2 [2nd ed], p. 240).

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Who is Bodhisattva Never Disparaging?

The following is a brief synopsis of the “Bodhisattva Never Disparaging” chapter: In the distant past, when the teaching of the Buddha Awesome Sound King was beginning to fall into formality and decline, a certain bodhisattva appeared and started to practice the Buddha’s teaching. At that time, people practiced Buddhism, but they had lost sight of its purpose and meaning. Furthermore, “monks of overbearing arrogance exercised great authority and power” (LS20, 266). The bodhisattva, unswayed by these circumstances, firmly believed that all people have the Buddha nature. So whenever he saw people, he said to them: “I have profound reverence for you, I would never dare treat you with disparagement or arrogance. Why? Because you are all practicing the bodhisattva way and are certain to attain Buddhahood” (LS20, 266-67). Because the bodhisattva always repeated those words, people mockingly called him “Never Disparaging” (LS20, 267). They “spoke ill of him and cursed him, saying, ‘This ignorant monk—where does he come from, presuming to declare that he does not disparage us and bestowing on us a prediction that we will attain Buddhahood? We have no use for such vain and irresponsible predictions!’” (LS20, 267). Some “would take sticks of wood or tiles and stones and beat and pelt him” (LS20, 267). But Bodhisattva Never Disparaging did not quit his practice and attained enlightenment, receiving the benefit of purifying the six senses. Those who persecuted him invited hellish suffering for lifetime after lifetime. But after eradicating their past offenses through eons of suffering, they eventually met the bodhisattva once again and, with his instruction, attained Buddhahood.

Practicing humanism in the real world

The circumstances surrounding Bodhisattva Never Disparaging are similar to our present circumstances in some significant respects. Furthermore, the bodhisattva’s ideas and actions provide us with valuable insights into how we can practice Buddhism today. I would like to discuss nine key points in this regard:

1. In a time of corrupt religious authority, true Buddhist practice means directly and forthrightly speaking the truth.

One reason why the “Bodhisattva Never Disparaging” chapter is useful as a guide to our practice today is that the circumstances under which the bodhisattva practiced are strikingly similar to ours. The sutra describes the time in which the story is set as follows: “After the original Awesome Sound King Thus Come One had passed into extinction, and after his Correct Law had also passed away, in the period of his Counterfeit Law, monks of overbearing arrogance exercised great authority and power” (LS20, 266).

It was a time long after the Buddha’s passing; it was a time of confusion with regard to the teachings of Buddhism. The Buddha’s correct teaching was obscured, and instead, people practiced a “Counterfeit Law,” that is, a formalistic or ritualistic remnant of the Buddha’s teaching. The sutra explains that it was “monks of overbearing arrogance” who contributed to the decline of Buddhism. Ignorant of the purpose and intent of Buddhism and manipulated by the religious authorities, people were unable to grasp the essence of Buddhist practice and devoted themselves to it in vain. In such a time of confusion and corruption, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging appeared and declared the ultimate truth of Buddhism—the existence of Buddhahood in all people, and thus the equality and dignity

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of all people.

Ours is a time when the “Correct Law” of the Daishonin’s Buddhism is obscured and “monks of overbearing arrogance” exert their influence. The Daishonin, therefore, explains that we should spread Buddhism in the present Latter Day of the Law following the example set by Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, saying “The method of propagation is also exactly the same both at the end of the Buddha Ionno’s [Awesome Sound King] Middle Day and now at the beginning of the Latter Day” (“On the Buddha’s Prophecy,” MW-1, 113). The Daishonin encourages us to do the same as Bodhisattva Never Disparaging did in his day—to speak the truth of Buddhism against the wishes of corrupt religious authority.

2. Self-identity is defined by action

Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s real name is not known. His was a nickname given by those who held him in contempt because he always repeated the words, “I would never dare disparage you, for you are all certain to attain Buddhahood!” (LS20, 267). His name is significant in this regard. In the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni asks the assembly: “For what reason was he named Never Disparaging?” (ibid., p. 266). Our name identifies us. Here the sutra indicates that the identity of a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra is ultimately determined by that person’s actions. This is consistent with the long tradition of Buddhism emphasizing one’s actions, rather than one’s status or wealth, as the essence of his or her identity.

One of the earliest Buddhist verses attributed to Shakyamuni reads: “A man becomes not a Brahmin by long hair or family or birth. The man in whom there is truth and holiness, he is in joy and he is a Brahmin” (*The Dhammapada*, Penguin 1973, p. 90). A Brahmin is a member of the highest or priestly caste among the Hindus. Brahmins, or Brahmans, were considered the noblest class of Indian society. Shakyamuni’s message here is that a person becomes noble not because of status or image, but because of action. Similarly, if we wish to identify ourselves with Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, we may do so only in terms of our actions—recognizing and respecting the Buddha nature inherent in all people. Our actions—thoughts, speech and deeds—determine who we are. After all, what we consider “self” is nothing other than the totality of our accumulated *karma*. And karma means “action”—our thoughts words and deeds. We are therefore fundamentally free to shape our identity exactly in the way we want to. Our Buddhist practice provides a powerful tool for creating and defining our self. We refer to the process through which we accomplish this as our “human revolution.”

3. The purpose of our Buddhist practice is to attain Buddhahood

Why do we practice Buddhism? The simplest questions are often the most important and the most difficult to answer. When Bodhisattva Never Disparaging appeared in the time of the “Counterfeit Law” of Buddha Awesome Sound King, though Buddhism was widely known, people had completely lost a sense of purpose in their Buddhist practice. People’s confusion about Buddhism is aptly demonstrated in their remarks to the bodhisattva: “This ignorant monk—where does he come from, presuming to declare that he does not disparage us and bestowing on us a prediction that we will attain Buddhahood? We have no use for such vain and irresponsible predictions!” (LS20, 267). Their responses are absurd in the sense that they are the very antithesis of the purpose of Buddhism.

People were deluded by clerical authority to believe that they should practice without

ever expecting to attain enlightenment. Not attaining Buddhahood (*or remaining dependent upon religious authority*), therefore, became their goal or their accustomed state of Buddhist practice. The bodhisattva's notion of practicing Buddhism to become a Buddha appeared strange or even blasphemous enough to persecute him for uttering such an idea. We practice Buddhism to reveal ourselves as Buddhas, that is, to be absolutely happy, unswayed by any circumstances. When people become confused about this fundamental purpose of Buddhism, they inevitably fall into a state of spiritual slavery.

From one perspective, the struggle of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging was to free people from such confusion and awaken them to the true purpose of Buddhism. The Lotus Sutra teaches us that in a time of confusion, we must first clarify what all Buddhists must ask when they start practicing: Why do I practice? Without answering this question correctly, our practice will become what the Daishonin describes as “an endless, painful austerity” (“On Attaining Buddhahood,” MW-1, 4).

4. Respecting others is a cause to reveal our own Buddhahood

From the actions of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging we find a key to realizing our happiness. The bodhisattva demonstrates that if we wish to see our own Buddhahood and reveal it, we must see it in the lives of others as well. There is no such thing as attaining our own enlightenment while remaining blind to the same potential in others. In fact, attaining enlightenment means, in one sense, to recognize the universality of Buddhahood. In this regard, the Daishonin, through skillful analogy, explains: “There is a fundamental oneness of self and others. Therefore when Bodhisattva Never Disparaging makes his bow of obeisance to the four groups of people, the Buddha nature inherent in the lives of the four groups of arrogant people bowed toward Bodhisattva Never Disparaging. This is the same as how when one bows facing a mirror, the reflected image bows back” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 769).

If our attitude is “I will treat people right when everybody starts treating me right,” then we will be more likely to lose people's respect and trust and drive them further away. Or it may be said that such an attitude is in itself the cause for disrespect and mistrust. Similarly, if we try our utmost to see Buddhahood in the lives of others and even start treating them on that premise, we will see a remarkable change both within our lives and in others' lives. Taking the initiative to respect those around us for their Buddhahood is mutually beneficial. In this sense, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging carried out his practice not only for the sake of others, but also for his own sake.

To believe in Buddhahood—our own and someone else's—is difficult. This is why the action of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging is so noble and rare. But at the same time, it is within anybody's grasp. Everyone is capable of respecting others; it is certainly not as difficult as levitating an assembly of people and suspending a gigantic tower in midair—the acts portrayed elsewhere in the sutra. Unlike these, the action of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging *can* be emulated by all of us. In this sense, the Daishonin explains: “To believe that Buddhahood exists within Humanity is the most difficult thing of all—as difficult as believing that fire exists in water or water in fire. . . . Bodhisattva Fukyo saw the Buddha in everyone he met, and Prince Siddhartha was a man who became a Buddha. These examples should help you to believe” (“The True Object of Worship,” MW-1, 54-55). What enables us to act in the way that Bodhisattva Never Disparaging did, the Daishonin teaches here, is nothing other than our faith in the universality of Buddhahood. And to continue our work we need strong faith—strong enough not to be discouraged by superficial reactions from others. Whenever we recognize and respect others' Buddha nature, their

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Buddhahood is bowing back in return, no matter how they react to us on the surface. The Daishonin, therefore, urges us to have courage to take the first step ourselves and not to wait vainly for the image in the mirror to bow first.

5. True tolerance stems from faith in humanity

Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, despite the relentless abuses he was subjected to, never lost his temper or quit his practice. The sutra describes his perseverance as follows: “Many years passed in this way, during which this monk was constantly subjected to curses and abuse. He did not give way to anger, however, but each time spoke the same words, ‘You are certain to attain Buddhahood’” (LS20, 267). In the verse section of the “Never Disparaging” chapter, the sutra reiterates the point: “When the people heard this, / they giped at him, cursed and reviled him, / but the bodhisattva Never Disparaging / bore all this with patience” (LS20, 269-70).

His tolerance and tenacity stand in sharp contrast to that displayed in an episode about Shariputra. According to this account, in a past existence, Shariputra renounced his bodhisattva practice because of the abuse and disrespect shown him by a certain Brahman. The Brahman had begged for Shariputra’s eye, which the latter provided him. Upon receiving it, however, the Brahman expressed disgust, tossed the eye on the ground and stepped on it, complaining of its foul odor. After renouncing the Bodhisattva practice and deciding to focus on his own enlightenment, Shariputra suffered for a long time. No longer able to recognize and respect the Brahman’s Buddha nature, Shariputra renounced his bodhisattva practice. But in doing so, he not only denied others’ Buddhahood, but his own as well.

The source of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s tolerance for people lay in his profound faith in humanity. No matter what cruel reactions he received from those he met, his faith in their potential Buddhahood never wavered. He was so surely convinced of this truth expounded by Buddhism that he had no use for resentment or impatience. He was confident that he stood on the side of truth, and this helped him transcend any ordinary emotionalism that he may have felt from time to time.

The kind of tolerance demonstrated by Bodhisattva Never Disparaging is not ordinary. His was not *passive tolerance*—that of accepting what one thinks is wrong just to protect one’s own tranquil space and avoid conflict or confrontation. He sought interaction with people and freely expressed his belief. His persistence in communicating his message to people annoyed them greatly. No doubt his contemporaries viewed him as an intolerant man who would not leave them alone. To leave people in confusion, however, is not an act of tolerance; it actually constitutes a lack of compassion. Bodhisattva Never Disparaging unconditionally accepted everyone on the basis of their inherent Buddhahood. His was *active tolerance*—a kind that brings about a real change in the world.

6. To practice non-violence is to be wise and strong

Bodhisattva Never Disparaging is a model for non-violence. He demonstrated his commitment to dialogue as the only means to address differences among people. He never resorted to violence of any kind because his abusers were never his enemies; he viewed them as extensions of himself who shared the supreme potential that he recognized in his own life.

It is important, however, to ask how he could remain committed to non-violence in a violent society without falling victim to violence. He was able to do so because he was wise and strong enough to avoid violent attacks, yet maintained a close enough contact with his

abusers to continue to communicate his faith in their Buddhahood. The sutra explains: “When he spoke in this manner, some among the group would take sticks of wood or tiles and stones and beat and pelt him. But even as he ran away and took up his stance at a distance, he continued to call out in a loud voice, ‘I would never dare disparage you, for you are all certain to attain Buddhahood!’” (LS20, 267).

He was not so meek or careless as to allow himself to be victimized by violent people. Presumably, he had the capacity to outrun anyone and to speak in a clear, loud voice. He was shrewd enough to protect himself. Here, the Lotus Sutra teaches us that to practice non-violence in the real world, we must exercise wisdom. His ability to run fast may be seen as the care and resourcefulness one must exercise to avoid being victimized in an abusive society. Bodhisattva Never Disparaging seems to tell us not to be anyone’s doormat in practicing tolerance and non-violence in today’s world.

7. Purifying our six senses through helping others

As a result of his consistent practice, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging gained numerous benefits. Besides vastly extending his life, for example, he was able to purify his senses to perceive the world correctly. The sutra explains: “Immediately he gained the kind of purity of vision and purity of the faculties of the ear, nose, tongue, body and mind . . .” (LS20, 267).

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 the 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).

8. Sincerity is true eloquence

Bodhisattva Never Disparaging also gained eloquence, goodness and tranquility as the sutra here explains: “At that time, when the four kinds of believers who were overbearingly arrogant, the monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen who had looked with contempt on this monk and given him the name Never Disparaging—when they saw that he had gained great transcendental powers, the power to preach pleasingly and eloquently, the power of great goodness and tranquility, and when they heard his preaching, they all took faith in him and willingly became his followers” (LS20, 267-8).

In one sense, it seems that he suddenly gained those wonderful qualities of eloquence, goodness and tranquility. It may be more natural, however, to conclude that his persistent sincerity to communicate the universality of Buddhahood finally reached the hearts of those people who had long been abusing him. His sincerity opened their eyes, and for the first time they saw the greatness of the man they had despised. Here the sutra suggests that true eloquence comes from sincerity, which ultimately transcends arrogance and prejudice.

9. The “poison-drum relationship” and “lessening one’s karmic retribution”

Through experiencing numerous persecutions on account of his faith in the Lotus Sutra, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging was also able to change his negative karma, as the sutra describes: “His offences had been wiped out” (LS20, 270).

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Here the sutra explains the principle of “lessening one’s karmic retribution,” which the Daishonin describes in the following passage: “Bodhisattva Fukyo was not abused and vilified, stoned and beaten with staves without reason. He had probably slandered the True Law in the past. The phrase ‘after expiating his sins’ indicates that because Bodhisattva Fukyo met persecution, he could eradicate his sins from previous lifetimes” (“Lessening One’s Karmic Retribution,” MW-1, 17). Here the Daishonin teaches us that all the hardships we undergo for the spread of Buddhism are never wasted; they are proof that we are positively transforming our negative karma and solidifying the foundation for lasting happiness.

The sutra states that those who vilified and abused Bodhisattva Never Disparaging had to suffer for a long time before they finally attained enlightenment: “At that time the four kinds of believers, . . . because anger arose in their minds and they treated me [Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, that is, Shakyamuni in a past existence] with disparagement and contempt, were for two hundred million kalpas never able to encounter a Buddha, to hear the Law, or to see the community of monks. For a thousand kalpas they underwent great suffering in the Avichi hell. After they had finished paying for their offences, they once more encountered the bodhisattva Never Disparaging, who instructed them in anuttara-samyak-sambodhi” (LS20, 268-9).

Thus, even those who abused the bodhisattva were able to form connections with the Lotus Sutra and eventually awaken to their Buddhahood, which they themselves had denied so vehemently. In regard to the power of the Lotus Sutra to save even those who oppose it, the Daishonin comments: “One should by all means persist in preaching the Lotus Sutra and causing them [the people of the age] to hear it. Those who put their faith in it will surely attain Buddhahood, while those who slander it will establish a ‘poison-drum relationship’ with it and will likewise attain Buddhahood” (“How Those Initially Aspiring to the Way Can Attain Buddhahood through the Lotus Sutra,” MW-6, 197). The Daishonin here stresses the importance of communicating the benefit of the Mystic Law to all people.

Nichiren Daishonin and Bodhisattva Never Disparaging

Throughout his writings, the Daishonin repeatedly identifies himself with Bodhisattva Never Disparaging. The twentieth chapter of the Lotus Sutra has particular bearing to his life since his entire life, in one sense, was dedicated to validating the message of this chapter. Here are some significant passages from the Daishonin’s writings regarding Bodhisattva Never Disparaging (Bodhisattva Fukyo):

- “The Lotus Sutra invariably concludes the Dharma preaching of all Buddhas of the three existences. The past events described in the *Fukyo* chapter I am now experiencing as predicted in the *Kanji* chapter; thus the present foretold in the *Kanji* chapter corresponds to the past of the *Fukyo* chapter. The *Kanji* chapter of the present will be the *Fukyo* chapter of the future, and at that time, I, Nichiren, will be its Bodhisattva Fukyo” (“Letter from Teradomari,” MW-4, 105-6).
- “The words of the twenty-four characters¹ of Fukyo are different from the five characters of Nichiren, but their spirit is the same. The method of propagation is also exactly the same both at the end of the Buddha Ionno’s [Awesome Sound King] Middle Day and now at the beginning of the Latter Day” (“On the Buddha’s Prophecy,” MW-1, 113).

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- “In the past, I was struck several times in the face with the fifth scroll of the Lotus Sutra, but I felt no resentment at it. In fact, I was actually delighted. For to be attacked in the manner described in the *Fukyo* chapter, to suffer assault as predicted in the *Kanji* chapter, is a great honor indeed” (“Letter to Myomitsu Shonin,” MW-5, 202).

As those passages indicate, it is clear that the Daishonin used the action of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging to guide his own life. So as practitioners of the Daishonin’s Buddhism we also have much to learn from the “Bodhisattva Never Disparaging” chapter of the Lotus Sutra.

Conclusion: Courage to respect all people

Although there are many important points in the “Bodhisattva Never Disparaging” chapter to be stressed, when we compare the life of this bodhisattva with that of the Daishonin, one quality that both shared clearly stands out—that is courage. Both had courage to speak the truth and to respect all people. Courage indeed was what enabled them to do what they set out to accomplish despite the abuses they underwent. The Lotus Sutra explains this point as follows: “Among the four kinds of believers he preached the Law with no fear in his mind” (LS20, 268). The Daishonin also stresses the importance of courage in our Buddhist practice in numerous passages. For example, to his disciples he states: “Each of you should summon up the courage of a lion and never succumb to threats from anyone. The lion fears no other beast, nor do its cubs. Slanderers are like howling jackals, but Nichiren’s followers are like roaring lions” (“On Persecutions Befalling the Buddha,” MW-1, 241). To use the action of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging as a guide to our daily practice, our first step may be to develop the courage to look for the brilliance of Buddhahood in the lives of others as well as our own. □

1. The phrase repeated by Bodhisattva Never Disparaging consists of twenty-four characters in Kumarajiva’s Chinese translation.

Topics for Discussion

How can we apply the actions of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging to our understanding and stance regarding the temple issue?

In light of the actions of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, what is the role and importance of courage in sharing Buddhism?

What lesson can we learn from Bodhisattva Never Disparaging in our dealings with others and winning in our daily lives?