

“GIFT OF THE UNLINED ROBE” (2)

The excerpt from Nichiren Daishonin’s “Gift of an Unlined Robe,” at right, and the commentary that follows it, are from SGI President Ikeda’s book Learning From the Goshō: The Eternal Teachings of Nichiren Daishonin, p. 17. This is the second of two parts. The first part appeared in our September issue.

The fourth volume of the Lotus Sutra states, “hatred and jealousy toward this sutra abound even when the Thus Come One is in the world” (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 164). The fifth volume explains that the Lotus Sutra “will face much hostility in the world and be difficult to believe” (LS14, 207). It may be that the Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai never read these passages with his life. That’s because the Lotus Sutra was universally believed and accepted by the people of his day. Nor in all likelihood was the Great Teacher Dengyo capable of living these words, because the conditions of the time in which he lived did not match those described by the passage “[since hatred and jealousy toward this sutra abound even when the Thus Come One is in the world,] how much more will this be so after his passing” (LS10, 164).

If Nichiren had not appeared in the country of Japan, these golden words of the Buddha would have been in vain. The testimony of Many Treasures (Taho) Buddha would not have amounted to anything. And the words of all Buddhas of the ten directions would have become lies. In the more than 2,220 years since the Buddha passed away, never before in India, China or Japan has there been someone to whom the words of the sutra, “It will face much hostility in the world and be difficult to believe,” have applied. If Nichiren had not appeared, the Buddha’s words would have withered.

Under these circumstances, I maintain my life with snow for food, as did Su Wu¹ when he was imprisoned. And I pass my time clad in a straw raincoat like Li Ling.² At times when there are no fruits or berries available in the trees of these mountains where I reside, I may go two or three days without eating. And once when my deerskin garment was torn, I went unclad for three or four months.

You have for some reason taken pity on such a person and, even though we have not yet met, sent a robe with which I might clothe myself. For this I am infinitely grateful.

When I put on this robe and recite the Lotus Sutra before the Buddha, while the robe is only one, it clothes 69,384 Buddhas. This is because there are 69,384 characters in the Lotus Sutra. And each character is a golden Buddha.

Therefore, these Buddhas will surely visit the two of you, husband and wife, who presented me with this robe and protect you as their followers.

In this life, your sincere offering becomes a prayer for the fulfillment of your every desire and a treasure. At the time of your deaths it will become the moon, the sun, a path, a bridge, a father, a mother, an ox or a horse, a litter, a cart, a lotus flower, and a mountain, and will usher you into the pure land of Eagle Peak. Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, Nam-myoho-enge-kyo. Nichiren

The eighth month of the first year of Kenji (1275)

Title: Gift Of An Unlined Robe (2)

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Author: Daisaku Ikeda

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You should always meet with the wife of Toshiro and read this letter together.
(*Gosho Zenshu*, pp. 1514–15)

BACKGROUND

Nichiren Daishonin wrote the letter “Gift of an Unlined Robe” in August 1275 at Mount Minobu when he was 53. The letter’s title was probably added later because the Daishonin explains the blessings one receives from making offerings to a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra. Little is known about the recipient’s identity. Since the Daishonin writes, “even though we have not yet met” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p.1515), it is clear that the recipient had never directly encountered the Daishonin at the time of this letter. Also, in the postscript of the letter, the Daishonin writes, “You should always meet with the wife of Toshiro [Shijo Kingo] and read this letter together” (GZ, p. 1515). “Gift of an Unlined Robe” was most likely addressed to a woman and her husband who were on friendly terms with Shijo Kingo’s family in Kamakura, the seat of the shogunate government. (For further information, see Sept. *Living Buddhism* p. 6).

“Buddhism exists because I exist” — this is the Daishonin’s immense conviction. The Buddha’s words, in a sense, became true precisely because the Daishonin single-handedly underwent great persecution.

To prove the proposition “Buddhism is true,” the Daishonin deliberately drew out negative forces and challenged them. Without such a great struggle, even the most outstanding scripture would, in the end, be no more than a book. Even the most profound sutra would be merely words. The sutra’s words only become Buddhism, only become a genuine religion, when they are put to the test in life.

This year, once again, we have commemorated April 2 [the anniversary of the passing of the second Soka Gakkai president, Josei Toda]. My mentor, President Toda, whom I will remember for all eternity, dedicated his entire life to proving the truth of Nichiren Daishonin’s words. Through his life, in the real world, he began to make a reality of kosen-rufu, which had for 700 years been only theory.

The Daishonin says, “If Nichiren had not appeared, the Buddha’s words would have withered.” The spirit to not allow the words of the original Buddha, Nichiren Daishonin, to have been in vain is the fundamental spirit of the Soka Gakkai. This was the spirit of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, and of Josei Toda. And this is the spirit of a disciple.

President Makiguchi deeply lamented the state of the priesthood. Solely concerned with defending its own interests, it had bowed before the military authorities and become mired in slander. “Isn’t this the time when we should remonstrate with the state?” he cried. “What are you afraid of?” And he went on to become a martyr for the Daishonin’s teachings. President Toda once reminisced about his mentor, saying:

The last time I saw President Makiguchi alive was in 1943. It was on the second floor of the Metropolitan Police Station. He was about to be taken to Tokyo Prison in Sugamo, and I was to follow later. I told the department officer that I wanted to bid him farewell, and I went to where he was.

When I met him there, I just looked at his face and wept. I could not speak. The last words I said to him were, “Please take care.”

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Later, I was unaware that President Makiguchi had died. I shall never forget the day – January 8, 1945 – when I was summoned before the preliminary judge for the very first time and told bluntly, “Makiguchi’s dead.” I just stood there stunned, unable even to weep. When I returned to my cell, I cried my heart out.

I had never experienced such grief as I felt at that moment. Then and there, I resolved: “I will show the world. I will prove beyond a doubt the righteousness of my mentor! If I were to adopt a pseudonym, I’d use the ‘Count of Monte Cristo’ [the hero of Alexandre Dumas’ novel, who was unjustly incarcerated]. With such resolve, I will achieve something great to repay him.”

President Makiguchi has not received the recognition that is his due. And I am determined to dedicate the rest of my life to proving the righteousness of my mentor’s actions.³

Every year when April 2 comes around, my heart is filled with exactly the same feelings toward my mentor, President Toda. Today Mr. Makiguchi’s name is known throughout the world. A suburb of São Paulo, Brazil, for example, has opened a Tsunesaburo Makiguchi Highway. And the Brazilian city of Curitiba is building a Tsunesaburo Makiguchi Park and also a Josei Toda Boulevard.

How it must delight President Toda for his mentor to be so honored. It almost seems to me as though I can see his smiling face in the blue skies of spring.

Under these circumstances, I maintain my life with snow for food, as did Su Wu when he was imprisoned. And I pass my time clad in a straw raincoat like Li Ling. At times when there are no fruits or berries available in the trees of these mountains where I reside, I may go two or three days without eating. And once when my deerskin garment was torn, I went unclad for three or four months. You have for some reason taken pity on such a person and, even though we have not yet met, sent a robe with which I might clothe myself. For this I am infinitely grateful. (GZ, 1514–15)

More than a year had passed since the Daishonin took up residence deep in the recesses of Mount Minobu. These were the conditions under which he was living. Su Wu and Li Ling were Chinese generals of antiquity who though they exerted themselves on behalf of the country, were captured by enemies and wound up leading highly constricted lives.

While eating snow, wearing crude garments made of straw, and living in a small hut, the Daishonin led the movement for the widespread propagation of the Mystic Law. Living with him were his disciples, and they had occasional “visits” from birds and deer.

In winter, it was extremely cold — so cold that they had trouble sleeping. They lacked sufficient food, and had neither miso nor salt in ample supply. It is said that the Daishonin gathered nuts and parsley and collected firewood to prepare food for himself and his disciples. It is also said that for clothing the Daishonin wore the skin of a deer that had died of natural causes.

By rights, the Daishonin ought to have been accorded the treatment due a teacher of the entire nation. But Japan repaid him only with persecution, so that he lived in want of even clothing and food.

Copious tears always welled up in President Toda’s eyes when he read in the Goshō of the Daishonin’s life under such circumstances. He would often remark: “The original Buddha suffered so much. No matter what happens, we who are his followers have to persevere. We

have to make the Daishonin's immense compassion known to the world."

Moreover, the Daishonin, while living under such conditions, continued to raise and encourage his followers, leaving them the Gohonzon and the Gosho. He thus devoted himself resolutely to establishing the path for kosen-rufu in the Latter Day of the Law. His compassion truly knew no bounds! How fortunate we are to be his followers!

The Daishonin described his daily existence in the frankest terms. If it were cold, he would say it was cold. And if he were suffering from hunger, he would indicate it. A Buddha is not some special being. A Buddha is human through and through. President Toda often called him a "great common mortal." Buddhism is not a religion that produces so-called living Buddhas. Rather, it enables ordinary people, just as they are, to manifest the light of supreme humanity. Nichiren Daishonin, though experiencing extreme hardship himself, offered this unknown couple (to whom he addressed this Gosho) such sincere and warm encouragement. He did the same while in Izu and Sado. Though an exile, he was more concerned about the plight of others than about his own troubles.

Once when some of the Daishonin's followers visited him on Sado Island, a profoundly moving drama unfolded. They had made a long journey to inquire after the Daishonin's well being. He met their concern with his own concern about their expenses for the return trip and even went so far as to borrow money from someone to give to them. Even facing the most difficult of circumstances, the Daishonin possessed the magnanimity and broad-mindedness to be most concerned about the welfare of others. In his conduct, we find true human strength and beauty.

A Sincere Offering Confers Immeasurable Benefit

When I put on this robe and recite the Lotus Sutra before the Buddha, while the robe is only one, it clothes 69,384 Buddhas. This is because there are 69,384 characters in the Lotus Sutra. And each character is a golden Buddha. Therefore, these Buddhas will surely visit the two of you, husband and wife, who presented me with this robe and protect you as their followers. In this life, your sincere offering becomes a prayer for the fulfillment of your every desire and a treasure. At the time of your deaths it will become the moon, the sun, a path, a bridge, a father, a mother, an ox or a horse, a litter, a cart, a lotus flower, and a mountain, and will usher you into the pure land of Eagle Peak. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

Nichiren

The eighth month of the first year of Kenji (1275)

You should always meet with the wife of Toshiro and read this letter together. (GZ, 1515)

What a welcome promise the Daishonin makes! He says that the couple who has made this offering to the Lotus Sutra's votary will be protected by 69,384 Buddhas. Such a grand spectacle defies the imagination. With such protection over the three existences, what could they possibly have to fear?

Elsewhere he says, "The heart alone is what really matters." As the story of the boy who makes an offering of a mud pie to Shakyamuni and is later reborn as King Ashoka illustrates, the heart is indeed mysterious and inscrutable.

The Mystic Law elucidates the inscrutable workings of the heart. The doctrine that a life-moment possesses three thousand realms explains the immense power of the heart. A

Buddha is someone who understands, on the most profound level, the workings and the power of the heart.

As stated in the passage of the Lotus Sutra, “They will enjoy peace and security in their present existence and good circumstances in future existences” (LS5, 99), the Daishonin assures the couple that they have absolutely nothing to fear in their present and future existences.

First, he says that in their present lives their offering will become a “prayer” and a “treasure.” He thus indicates that, through the protective functions of all Buddhas, their sincere faith in offering a robe will become a cause for the fulfillment of all their desires and the accumulation of immense benefit.

Then, regarding the journey after death, he says that they will be protected by all Buddhas and need have no fear. Their faith in making this offering will become a “sun” and “moon” brightly illuminating their journey, as well as a “great path” and a “bridge” over which to make their way.

They will be gently led by the hand by a loving “mother” and “father.” They can ride with composure on either an “ox” or a “horse,” a “litter” or a “cart.” And finally, they will board the “lotus flower” for Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and arrive at the “treasure mountain” — the pure land of Eagle Peak where the Buddha dwells.

For an offering of but a single unlined robe, the Daishonin promises eternal good fortune and benefit. This is because he perceives the sincerity with which the robe is imbued.

The unlined robe the couple sent was woven through and through with their sincerity. No doubt the Daishonin could sense this in its warmth and feel. How truly noble and pure were the hearts of this couple, who believed in and devoted themselves to the Daishonin at a time when the entire country was desperately trying to persecute him.

A person who has crossed the precipice of life and death many times understands true human worth. Neither power nor fame makes someone great. The light of true human greatness shines vividly among ordinary people who live straight and true, neither seeking honor nor craving wealth. One can well imagine the joy of the couple who received this letter.

Incidentally, the person mentioned in the postscript, “the wife of Toshiro,” was a friend of Shijo Kingo’s family.

The Daishonin concludes by urging the couple to gather with other followers and read this letter together. In modern terms, he is telling them to hold discussion meetings. As long as we continue to study the Goshō and discuss faith with our fellow members, there is no danger of our deviating from the correct path.

In just this brief postscript, the Daishonin touches on the vital point of carrying through with faith in unity with other believers in the Mystic Law. Such detailed consideration is characteristic of the Daishonin—it is the spirit of the original Buddha.

We need to treasure each person thoroughly. This is the spirit of the Goshō and of the SGI.

The Goshō is the jewel of humankind that crystallizes with diamond-like clarity the humanism of Nichiren Daishonin. Because this is an age of spiritual malaise, it is all the more important that we study the Goshō and return to the humanism of Nichiren Daishonin.

Footnotes

1. Su Wu (140–60 B.C.E.): A minister of Emperor Wu of the Former Han dynasty. In 100 b.c.e., the emperor sent Su Wu to demand that a northern tribe acknowledge fealty.

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Their chief had Su Wu seized and imprisoned in a cave, where he was forced to survive by eating snow.

2. Li Ling (d. 74 B.C.E.): A military commander during the Former Han dynasty. During battle, he was captured by barbarians and imprisoned. Emperor Wu mistakenly believed that he had revolted against the Han dynasty, and had his family killed.
3. From Josei Toda's remarks at the eleventh memorial service for President Makiguchi (1954).

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