OVERCOMING PESSIMISM WITH THE LOTUS SUTRA
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How does the Lotus Sutra address the issue of pessimism? In reciting the "Expedient Means" and "Life Span" chapters every day, we are celebrating our enlightened self and awakening to the eternal and boundless life of the Buddha that exists within us. The Lotus Sutra is therefore a very optimistic teaching.

In my years as a psychotherapist in a mental health clinic, depression was the problem most often presented by my patients. This included feelings of hopelessness, a lack of purpose and pessimism. Depressed people are frequently isolated, lonely and in need of caring relationships. The popularity of the best seller *Tuesdays with Morrie*,[1] shows that people are seeking answers to profound questions about the meaning of life. Morrie was a professor who was dying from ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease) and the book is about his dialogue with one of his students. Many issues that Morrie Schwartz discusses with his beloved student Mitch are also addressed by the Lotus Sutra. We are fortunate as practitioners of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism because our practice enables us to overcome fundamental sufferings, including pessimism.

The Optimism of the Lotus Sutra

How does the Lotus Sutra address the issue of pessimism? The verse section (*jigage*) of our recitation of the sutra, begins with the word *ji* and ends with *shin*, which together mean "self." In other words, reciting the sutra is equal to self-praise. President Ikeda says that the verse section is the essence of the "Life Span" chapter, which is itself the soul of Buddhism. It is a call to open one's life to the greater self of enlightenment. In reciting the "Expedient Means" and "Life Span" chapters every day, we are celebrating our enlightened self and awakening to the eternal and boundless life of the Buddha that exists within us. The Lotus Sutra is, therefore, a very optimistic teaching.

I heard that President Ikeda once met a young woman working in a restaurant who was depressed over not getting along with her co-workers. He encouraged her by saying she was not getting along with others because she needed to learn how to praise herself. Her dissatisfaction with others originated in dissatisfaction with herself. Through our practice we learn to praise ourselves—our greater self or Buddha nature. If we depend on others for praise, then when they criticize us, our sense of self is shaken. In this highly competitive society, it's very easy to become pessimistic so we have to learn how to praise ourselves, to become optimistic.

Many people spend years in psychotherapy dealing with how they were criticized or demoralized by their parents. This is called working through the transference, the effects of childhood relationships. It is very hard to learn to praise ourselves, but easy to be swayed by external praise or criticism. By chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we begin to praise ourselves.

We uphold the Gohonzon, which means we uphold the Mystic Law that is the essence of our lives. This means that we ourselves are entities of the Mystic Law. We embody great good fortune. We are the Treasure Tower explained in the sutra. Therefore we can never be defeated. We need never be afraid. When we are absolutely certain that we are the Treasure Tower,

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that we embody the Buddha, we can achieve a state of being in which life is enjoyable. The object of faith is to realize and attain this state. Those who live in the world of the SGI, of kosen-rufu, can enjoy this state of mind forever.

It is valuable to ask ourselves, as SGI President Ikeda suggests here: "Will you be an optimist or a pessimist? ... A pessimist sees the worst in everything, always seeing the painful and dark side of things. If you are always viewing the world through the eyes of a pessimist, eventually your mind—your life—will be colored by pessimism. Once that happens, you cannot expect to find happiness. If you are always worrying, 'I never have any money,' or 'Oh no, another meeting!' then life itself, far from being enjoyable, is nothing but a painful austerity!"2

But if we take the optimist's view, we see our lives in a hopeful light. The quintessence of optimism is faith. If we fall sick, President Ikeda says that we can use that as an opportunity to rest and use the time to think about long range or eternal matters.

This is precisely what Morrie did when he became bedridden with ALS. Rather than bemoaning his fate, he used the time to have philosophical discussions with his student, Mitch, and the subsequent book has been a source of encouragement for countless people. Professor Martin Seligman, author of *Learned Optimism*, says it's easy to feel pessimistic and a victim of circumstances. Many people feel like victims in this society, and of course they need an outlet for their suffering.

In psychotherapy, people often seek comfort because of some kind of abuse. Through the Buddhist principle of changing poison into medicine, I believe it is easier for Buddhists to attack the source of their suffering. Our approach is, "Because I had this kind of family or this kind of problem growing up, I have an opportunity to transform my suffering into enlightenment." When we chant, we don't have to dwell in the past, we use it as fuel to create a better life—from this moment forward.

President Ikeda uses the poet Johann Goethe as an example of a realistic optimist. He writes that Goethe was very cheerful and lived his life with great vigor. "One of the essentials of Goethe's thought was cheerfulness—the way he lived his life with vivacity and vigor. I think that the secret and the wisdom of this great writer's literature, his poetry and his life are to be found in this one point. Goethe believed that we should constantly be achieving things in our lives. He called out for us to always march cheerfully ahead without regrets, to live with energy and vigor." Goethe was an optimist. Not the sort of optimist that does nothing, just thinking that things will work out and dreaming his time away. Instead he was an optimist who acted, who made real achievements. "Goethe was a man of action who, rather than complaining about his fate, took action. He was a man who lived with the spirit of creativity, energy and vigor."3

Victor Frankl's book *Man's Search for Meaning*4 underscores the importance of maintaining hope in the face of adversity. Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist who survived the Auschwitz concentration camp during World War II. The ability to maintain hope and find meaning during extreme circumstances meant the difference between life and death. His experiences in Auschwitz showed him time and again that a prisoner's sense of hope or optimism was directly related to his survival. When a prisoner lost hope, he became susceptible to physical and spiritual decline.

One prisoner, a fairly well-known composer, told Frankl of a dream he had had. He had been granted his one wish—to know when the war would be over and the prisoners liberated. A voice in his dream told him that the war would be over on March 30, 1945. The dream occurred in February 1945, and the man told Frankl about it in early March, full of

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hope and conviction that the day of liberation was at hand. But, as the end of March drew near, it became apparent that his dream was not going to come true. On March 29, he suddenly became ill with a high fever. On March 30, the day he had hoped for freedom, he lost consciousness and became delirious. On March 31, he was dead. Frankl said that outwardly it looked like he had died of typhus, but he feels the death was intricately connected to the man's loss of hope. "The ultimate cause of my friend's death was that the expected liberation did not come and he was severely disappointed. This suddenly lowered his resistance against the latent typhus infection."5

Frankl mentions that the concentration-camp doctor observed a higher death rate between Christmas of 1944 and New Year's 1945. This was not due to worse conditions, weather, or increased disease. The real reason was that the prisoners had lived with the hope that they would be liberated by Christmas.

The Bodhisattva Spirit Transcends Isolation

President Ikeda writes: "When your determination changes, everything else begins to move in the direction you desire. The moment you resolve to be victorious, every nerve and fiber in your being immediately orient themselves toward your success. On the other hand, if you think, 'This is never going to work out,' at that instant every cell in your being will be deflated, giving up the fight. Everything then will move in the direction of failure. I want you to understand the subtle workings of the mind. How you orient your mind, the kind of attitude you have, greatly influences both yourself and your environment."6

Those of us who embrace the Lotus Sutra are so fortunate to be able to use this optimistic teaching to challenge and win in our day-to-day struggles. In "Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra," President Ikeda says that people in the modern age are suffering the "wound of social isolation." Takanori Endo, in the same dialogue, concurs that people are becoming more and more isolated and forget what it means to encourage one another.7

But because of the bodhisattva spirit and the Mystic Law, we can restore our sense of wholeness and connectedness and overcome our sense of isolation by helping others.

In *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Morrie describes how he spends his last days listening to other people's problems. He asks Mitch whether he understands why it is so important for him to hear other people's problems. "Don't I have enough pain and suffering of my own?" he asks his student. "Of course I do. But giving to other people is what makes me feel alive. Not my car or my house. Not what I look like in the mirror. When I give my time, when I can make someone smile after they were feeling sad, it's as close to health as I ever feel. Do the kinds of things that come from the heart. When you do, you won't be dissatisfied; you won't be longing for somebody else's things. On the contrary, you'll be overwhelmed with what comes back."8

In "Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra," Endo says: "In terms of psychology, we often hear that concern for others has a stimulating effect on a person's own mental and emotional health."9

Victor Frankl writes that he was able to survive by helping others. In the camp there was a strict rule against saving those who were trying to commit suicide. However, his particular block warden wanted to prevent prisoners from becoming suicidal. He asked Frankl to give support to the prisoners in his hut, to lift their spirits during a particularly difficult time of physical deprivation. There was no electricity and the prisoners lay desolate and hungry in the dark. Frankl writes: "God knows, I was not in the mood to give psychologi-

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cal explanations or to preach any sermons, to offer my comrades a kind of medical care of their souls. I was cold, hungry, irritable and tired, but I had to make the effort and use this unique opportunity. Encouragement was now more necessary than ever."10

He began by telling the prisoners their situation was not the most terrible they could think of. Asking them to look at what totally irreplaceable losses they had suffered, he said the very fact that they were still alive gave them reason to hope. Everything they had lost—health, happiness, position in society, fortune, even family—could be restored. "After all we still had our bones intact." He quoted Nietzsche: "That which does not kill me makes me stronger."11

He talked about the future, that one never knows what is going to happen within the next hour. The prisoners were encouraged to reflect on their past and how the light of the past still shone on their present darkness. All the great things they had accomplished in their lives, all the great thoughts they had, still lived within them. Frankl quoted the line of a poem: "What you have experienced, no power on earth can take from you." Finally he urged them to find meaning in their suffering, "that life under any circumstances never ceases to have meaning."12

Frankl writes: "The purpose of my words was to find a full meaning in that hut and that practically hopeless situation. I saw that my efforts had been successful. When the electric bulb flared up again, I saw the miserable figures of my friends limping toward me, to thank me with tears in their eyes. But I have to confess here that only too rarely had I the inner strength to make contact with my companions in suffering and that I must have missed many opportunities for doing so."13

The *Diagnostic Statistic Manual* is used by psychiatrists and psychologists to diagnose mental illness. It contains the descriptions of more than 230 emotional diseases. Meaninglessness is not among these descriptions. However, much depression stems from a sense of lack of purpose or meaning. Carl Jung said: "About a third of my cases are not suffering from any clinically definable neurosis, but from the senselessness and aimlessness of their lives."14

The Lotus Sutra not only enables us to regain hope but to find meaning in our lives. When we awaken to our identity as bodhisattvas, we are able to focus on our purpose. There are countless examples of people held in extreme circumstances who were able to survive by helping others. POWs in Vietnam found intricate ways to communicate with their fellow prisoners. Americans held hostage in Iran were able to continue by leaving notes or bits of food for the other captives. Parents who have lost children to disease create meaning out of their loss by raising money to fight the disease. An entire organization was created by one mother's determination to prevent children from being killed by drunk drivers—MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Drivers). It is the bodhisattva spirit that enables us to use crisis as an opportunity. The best example of this is Nichiren Daishonin, who wrote "I cannot hold back the tears when I view the persecutions befalling me now" (MW-1, 94). His persecution and extreme exile on Sado Island held the ultimate meaning for him and the future of Buddhism; it was proof of his identity as the true Buddha.

Morrie Schwartz also discovered meaning in his life. He tells Mitch: "The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning."15

President Ikeda says that when we encourage another person, we find our own spirits refreshed. This is the basis of our SGI activities. When we encourage others, we refresh our

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own spirits. When we set out on a home visit or to a meeting—even when we may not feel like going—we always return rejuvenated because we are making the effort as a Bodhisattva of the Earth.

The "Expedient Means" chapter teaches that all phenomena are connected—that we have the life of the bodhisattva in common. This is the profound concept of interdependence. By practicing the bodhisattva acts of sharing, caring and seeking, we are able to accumulate fortune. We are also able to transform the three poisons. Through sharing, we remove the poison of greed. Through caring, we remove the poison of anger. Through seeking, we remove the poison of foolishness.

When we care for someone, it is hard to sustain feelings of anger. We have to transform anger into caring for others for the sake of justice. A good example of this is the temple issue. Many of us feel outraged by the injustice of Nikken and the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood. But if we are able to use this anger to protect our members, by having the courage to say what needs to be said, we can transform this anger into justice and compassion. In order to encourage others, we have to seek the wisdom of the Buddha. By studying the Daishonin's writings or President Ikeda's guidance, and praying to grasp their principles and spirit, we overcome our own ignorance and develop wisdom to encourage others.

Therefore, by practicing the Lotus Sutra, we can break through our sense of isolation, narcissism and loneliness. When we care for others, we break through the shell of our lesser ego. In his dialogue on the sutra, President Ikeda explains: "When we help people expand their lives, our lives also expand. This is the marvel of the bodhisattva path; actions to benefit others cannot be separate from actions to benefit oneself."16

Overcoming Fear of Death

What has made *Tuesdays With Morrie* so popular is that we see his humanism expressed in the face of his imminent death. President Ikeda refers to modern civilization as the civilization that has forgotten death. Especially in the West, people want to ignore death. In fact many of our fears could stem from our ultimate fear of death. Morrie comes to terms with the fact that we are all aware that we are going to die but choose to ignore it. He encourages his student that the best way to prepare for death is to live well, to be more involved with one's own life. He says: "Do what the Buddhists do. Every day, have a little bird on your shoulder that asks, 'Is today the day? Am I ready? Am I doing all I need to do? Am I being the person I want to be?'"[17] He goes on to say that once we learn how to die we learn how to live.

Of course we Buddhists don't have a little bird on our shoulders, but we have morning and evening prayers in which we reflect: Am I being the person I want to be? President Ikeda says: "People find contemplating their death so distasteful that they instead look for one thing after another in which to absorb themselves...they arrive at death without having prepared in the least for that moment."18

He quotes Tolstoy: "Death is more certain than the morrow, than night following day, than winter following summer. Why is it then we prepare for the night and for the wintertime, but we do not prepare for death...There is only one way to prepare for death—and that is to live well."19

Nichiren Daishonin encourages us not to become overly attached to the temporary phenomena of life. "No matter how dearly you may cherish your estate, when you die, it will only fall into the hands of others." (MW-3, 238)

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The dying Morrie who exhorts Mitch not to value the wrong things echoes these same sentiments. He explains that we are so controlled by consumerism that we are totally consumed in having a new house and new car, placing value on material goods over love or relationships with others.

We have a tendency to think of death as occurring in the far-distant future. It is natural for young people to feel this way but as people age, their tendency to avoid thinking about death actually increases. Years and years can slip by while you say to yourself, 'I'll start practicing in earnest someday,' or 'I'll work harder once I get through my present difficulties.' Then, finally it dawns on you that you will have to face death without having accumulated any real fortune in your life.

In "Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra," President Ikeda says that nothing is more important in life than the issue of life and death. "Having an awareness and understanding of death actually raises our life condition. For it is when we are cognizant of the reality and inevitability of death that we begin to earnestly seek something eternal and determine to make the most valuable use of each moment of life." He says that to ignore death is to live an animalistic existence, and that when a civilization avoids the issue of death, people fall into decadence, seeking only temporary and immediate gratification, adding: "It's no coincidence that it has at the same time become a civilization of unbridled greed."20

In *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Morrie exhorts Mitch to do things that come from the heart, that way his life will become more meaningful. Mitch asks Morrie how he would spend one last day of his life if he were healthy for twenty-four hours. Morrie replies that he'd get up in the morning to do his exercises, have a breakfast of sweet rolls and tea, and go for a swim. He'd have his friends come over one or two at a time to talk about their families. Mitch was disappointed in his teacher's reply, perplexed that he could find perfection in such average things. He wanted Morrie to strive for a more exotic last day, like flying to Italy or some tropical island. Then Mitch realizes that this was precisely the point: that his teacher, in facing his own death so squarely, was able to find perfection in the ordinary, and that caring for others was the most important act he could perform.

Exactly in this vein, Buddhism encourages us to polish our lives—to do our human revolution—to harness the power of the Mystic Law and to share it with others. Embracing the Lotus Sutra means tapping the life force of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, fusing with the Gohonzon. This way our life and our death become joyful. Buddhism gives people the means to develop themselves and open their eyes to the limitless power inherent in their lives.

Death is not to be dreaded. It enables us to seek something eternal. How does the Buddha view death? Essential to this question is the parable in the "Expedient Means" chapter of the Lotus Sutra. An excellent physician causes his children to think he has died so that they will take medicine he has left behind. Because they are so upset that he has departed, they take it and become cured, whereupon their father reappears. This parable points to the importance of having a seeking mind. President Ikeda says, "When we have access to something all the time, then no matter how lofty and sublime it may be, we tend to forget our sense of appreciation."21

When the children hear of their father's death, they wake up and seek the truth. This is the meaning of the phrase "single-mindedly desiring to see the Buddha" (LS16, 230). The Buddha's death is an expedient means. He uses his death to make people seek the eternal life of Buddha. The Lotus Sutra says if the Buddha remains in the world for a long time, people "will fail to realize how difficult it is to encounter the Buddha and will not approach him with

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a respectful and reverent mind." (LS16, 227). The person who seeks the Buddha becomes the Buddha himself.

The concept of seeking the Buddha is connected to the mentor and disciple relationship and how we live while the mentor is alive. President Toda discussed the famous phrase "now is the last moment." He said: "Whose last moment do you suppose the line 'Now is the last moment of his life' (MW-1, 22) refers to? How forlorn we would feel if the Buddha ceased to exist. We should summon resolute faith and practice with the sense that we now have to part with the Buddha."

"Now is the last moment' is an exhortation to struggle intensely for kosen-rufu with the thought that now is the last moment of the mentor's life. It is a truly fortunate thing to work for kosen-rufu together with and supported by the mentor. Those who devote themselves in earnest while the mentor is alive correspond to the children in the parable who have not lost their senses."22

When President Makiguchi died, Josei Toda waged a relentless struggle against the evil forces that had driven his mentor to his death. Makiguchi's death was the expedient means that propelled the post-war kosen-rufu movement. "*Myo* corresponds to death and *ho* to life. The mentor corresponds to death and the disciple to life."23 The essence of the "Life Span" chapter is the principle of mentor and disciple.

What does this mean for us who are practicing with our mentor now? Do we take for granted that President Ikeda will be around forever or do we struggle in earnest during his lifetime? We have to be victorious in our present lifetime. Victory in this life translates into victory after death and throughout eternity. Nichiren Daishonin states: "I hope my disciples will ponder this matter, cutting short their sleep by night and curtailing their leisure by day. Do not spend this life in vain and regret it for ten thousand years to come" (MW-5, 173). President Ikeda writes: "Use your time wisely and polish your life. When I was young, my health was so poor that I might have died at any time. Therefore, I threw myself into efforts for Buddhism with the determination to use each moment to the fullest."24

In other words, fighting for kosen-rufu together with our mentor is the best way to live well and die well.

In his dialogue, he urges us to awaken to our mission and our true self. This is what it means to read the "Life Span" chapter with one's life. We become one with the eternal Buddha through our continuous efforts for others. He describes how President Toda, when he was ill, would prop himself up in bed to answer questions about Buddhism. President Toda would say: "No matter how bad a mood I may be in, being asked a question about the Daishonin's teaching always cheers me up."25

The practice of the Lotus Sutra enables us to live victoriously with hope and devotion to the happiness of others. It is the perfect teaching. By reciting the sutra every day, we can recover hope and overcome pessimism. It provides a means for us to transcend our isolation and loneliness and give meaning to our lives by caring for others. We can face death by living well—plumbing the depths of our lives. Buddhism teaches us how to live well, thus learning how to die. It is vitally important that we develop a seeking mind toward our mentor.

At the end of *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch asks: "Have you ever really had a teacher? One who sees you as a raw but precious thing, a jewel that, with wisdom, could be polished to a proud shine? If you are lucky enough to find your way to such a teacher, you will always find your way back."26

We have been lucky enough to find such a teacher in President Ikeda. ❑

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Footnotes

1. Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie* (New York: Doubleday, 1997)
2. *World Tribune* Nov. 1, 1993, p. 4, a lecture by Daisaku Ikeda entitled "Live So That Life Itself is a Joy," Vancouver Community Center October 1994.
3. Ibid.
4. Frankl, Viktor E., *Man's Search for Meaning: an introduction to logotherapy*. (New York: Washington Square, 1963.
5. Ibid., p. 97
6. *World Tribune*, January 11, 1999 from a speech by Wendy Clark, quote by President Ikeda.
7. *Living Buddhism*, October 1998, p. 30
8. Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, p. 128
9. *Living Buddhism*, October 1998, p. 29
10. Frankl, Victor, *Man's Search for Meaning*, p. 104
11. Ibid. p. 104
12. Ibid., p. 105
13. Ibid., p. 105
14. Julius Segal, *Winning Life's Toughest Battles-Roots of Human Resilience* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1986), p. 54-55
15. Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, p. 43
16. *Living Buddhism*, October 1998, p. 30.
17. Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, p. 81
18. *Living Buddhism*, November 1998, p. 8
19. Ibid., p. 8.
20. *Living Buddhism*, March 1999, pp. 34-35
21. Ibid., p. 38
22. Ibid., p. 39
23. Ibid., p. 40
24. *Living Buddhism*, November 1998, p. 11
25. *Living Buddhism*, March 1999, p. 44
26. *Tuesdays with Morrie*, p. 192.

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