

YOUTH STUDY JULY
“GENERAL STONE TIGER”
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HOW DO WE CHANGE POISON INTO MEDICINE?
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In the eighth volume of the *Maka Shikan* and in the eighth volume of Miao-lo's *Guketsu* it is said, “The stronger one's faith, the greater the god's protection.” This means that the protection of the gods depends on the strength of one's faith. The Lotus Sutra is a keen sword, but its might depends upon the one who wields it. (MW-1, p. 226)

In this letter, Nichiren Daishonin is writing to thank Shijo Kingo for tending to him while he was ill. As a samurai, Kingo had to work for Lord Ema, and this lord had almost complete power over Kingo's fate. Though he was once in Lord Ema's favor, when this letter was written, Kingo was in constant danger. His lord reduced his wealth and property, the other samurai used his faith in the Daishonin as a way to criticize him, and they made no secret of their desire to kill him. Kingo was, by nature, a very hot-tempered and impulsive man, so the Daishonin used every opportunity to encourage Kingo to deal with this situation through faith.

Since Kingo was the object of so much envy, traveling gave his enemies an opportunity to ambush him. Since he was both hot-headed and extremely talented, he was likely to take risks, believing himself to be better than his opponents. Also, perhaps because he was such a devout follower of the Daishonin, he expected that his faith would protect him from any harm.

Sensing this, Nichiren Daishonin used this simple thank-you note as an opportunity to teach Kingo a lesson about faith, a lesson about changing poison into medicine.

In this letter, the Daishonin writes: “...if one's illness is caused by immutable karma, even the most excellent medicine will turn to poison, but if he believes in the Lotus Sutra, poison will change into medicine” (MW-1, p. 226).

Here, though the Daishonin is using this example from Buddhist scriptures as a way of thanking Kingo, more importantly, he is explaining a profound concept: If someone has accumulated enough negative karma, even their best efforts will not bear fruit. Try as they might, no amount of strategizing or action will help. In fact, “even the most excellent medicine will turn to poison.” We've probably all experienced or seen situations like this. Situations where, when confronted with a certain difficulty, not only did our best efforts fail, they in fact made things worse.

But the Daishonin also says that “if he believes in the Lotus Sutra, poison will change into medicine.” This doesn't simply mean that we can overcome our problems. It means that by overcoming them, we will actually be better off than we were before, that going through those difficulties actually helped us.

We have heard this phrase many times. Whenever we encounter difficulty, our seniors in faith will encourage us to “change poison into medicine.” This is a very nice-sounding idea, but really, what does that mean? *How* do we change poison into medicine?

This particular letter spells out quite a clear lesson for Shijo Kingo, but this is certainly applicable to us today.

First, the Daishonin outlines very detailed advice, telling Kingo not to risk long journeys, even to visit Nichiren Daishonin himself. He also tells Kingo that if he does come, he should spare no expense in making sure he is well equipped and has trustworthy companions on his journey.

This seems like very sound advice, but it also seems to correspond to “strategies” that one might take to solve problems, and doesn’t seem to have much to do with faith. But then, immediately after giving Kingo such detailed advice, the Daishonin wrote the passage above. Because of our strong faith and practice, we *can* count on the protection of the Buddhist gods, but the strength of that protection is in exact proportion to the strength of our faith. A serious attitude in faith is expressed in how seriously you make efforts to deal with the problems in your life. Conversely, a carefree attitude about your problems — “Oh, it’ll work out. I’ll just chant.” — expresses a carefree attitude in faith. Therefore the Daishonin cautioned Kingo: Only by taking every possible precaution could one count on the protection of the Buddhist gods. “This means that the protection of the gods depends on the strength of one’s faith. The Lotus Sutra is a keen sword, but its might depends upon the one who wields it.”

But let’s be clear. Actions alone, strategies alone, *may* work. But as this letter says, if the problem stems from deep-rooted karma, your best efforts won’t be enough. If we have firm faith in the Daishonin’s teaching, then our best efforts will have their best effects. So *here* is the practical formula for changing poison into medicine that the Daishonin gives us: Faith + Best Effort = Victory. When confronted with difficulties, if we exert ourselves in our practice, every bad situation will ultimately become a benefit, and poison will change into medicine.

WHO IS SHIJO KINGO? SUMMARIZED FROM THE BOOK, THE LIFE OF NICHIREN DAISHONIN.

Shijo Kingo was one of the most devout followers of Nichiren Daishonin. He was a samurai warrior and a trained physician. He was also a lay believer — that is, someone who practiced Buddhism within society, as opposed to a priest who renounces society to practice Buddhism. He is well known because he stood by Nichiren Daishonin through some of his most difficult circumstances. Because of Kingo’s firm faith, he was entrusted with many of the most profound and important of the Daishonin’s writings. (The Daishonin evaluated people according to their strength of faith, not according to their position in society. Therefore, many of his most profound teachings were given to lay believers.)

In 1274, Kingo tried to convert his lord — the person he worked for — to the Daishonin’s Buddhism. However, many other samurai who worked for Lord Ema and were jealous of Kingo’s position used this as an opportunity to criticize Kingo to the lord, hoping to undermine him. Lord Ema, in fact, did reduce Kingo’s wealth and position. Though he was a very hot-tempered person and inclined to lash out in anger at the unjust treatment he received, he was encouraged by the Daishonin to regard his service to his lord as a key part of his practice of Buddhism. He was encouraged to change poison into medicine. Kingo’s struggle lasted many years. Ultimately, however, Kingo’s dedication paid off. Lord Ema became quite ill, and Shijo Kingo used his medical skills to cure him. It was fortunate for Kingo that he had done nothing rash to further alienate his lord, so that at this

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time of crisis, Lord Ema naturally turned to Kingo. Kingo's willingness and ability to help proved to Ema that Kingo was a sincere and faithful man, and not only did he restore Kingo's wealth, Ema actually increased it beyond what Kingo possessed earlier.

Finally, as we can see from this particular letter, Kingo constantly exerted himself to protect Nichiren Daishonin, by seeking out his guidance; making offerings of food, clothing or money; and even tending to the Daishonin when he became ill. He is a model of faith, a model of practicing and protecting Buddhism in the midst of hardship, and a model of showing proof of victory in our lives.

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