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BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW OF “LETTER TO NIIKE”
BY DAVID TEMPEST, LOS ANGELES

“Letter to Niike” was written by Nichiren Daishonin in February 1280 while he was living at Mount Minobu. He retired to the distant and secluded Mount Minobu in order to spend his last years transmitting his most profound teachings and raising disciples who could propagate Buddhism after his passing. He was 59 years old at the time, and the letter was written only four months after he inscribed the Dai-Gohonzon and two years before his death.

This is a very profound writing, but it was written as a personal letter addressed to Niike Saemon-no-jo, who was not a priest (as many might think), but a samurai. Nichiren Daishonin transmitted his most significant teachings to anyone who sincerely sought to practice Buddhism, regardless of their status or title. Niike was so called because he lived in an area of the same name.

“Letter to Niike” is almost a road map as to how to practice Buddhism correctly, and contains several well-known passages, as well as seven key points of instruction for our faith. The points are:

- Being vigilant not to commit any of the 14 slanders. Ultimately, though, what is important is to act in accord with the spirit of the Lotus Sutra rather than simply the words.
- The correct spirit of making offerings is out of gratitude for the immense benefits we receive from being able to practice Buddhism.
- The importance of continuing in our practice and not giving up halfway. This is illustrated by the famous passage “...the journey from Kamakura to Kyoto takes twelve days. If you travel for eleven but stop on the twelfth, how can you admire the moon over the capital?”
- With his remarkable insight, the Daishonin uses the story of the Kankucho bird to describe human nature and teach us not to be swayed by good circumstances, fame or fortune. It is important to develop our fortune, even when times are good, so that we have nothing to fear or regret later.
- Warning about priests who appear saintly but who slander the Law. In Buddhism, it is important to seek substance, and not be deceived by someone’s title or appearance. Regardless of how great someone looks or saintly their appearance, we should be careful to see if what they preach will really lead to our happiness.
- Using the analogy of an egg developing into a bird, the Daishonin explains that it is completely natural for us to become a Buddha. The purpose of the Lotus Sutra is to nurture the potential Buddhahood within our lives (the egg) into the Buddha nature, which expresses itself in our lives and actions.
- The Daishonin admonishes us to resolve our doubts so that they do not hinder our faith.

STANDING FIRM IN OUR JOURNEY OF FAITH BY JOHN PLUMMER, NEW YORK

In the United States, we are surrounded by constant displays of both wealth and fame. Some are really glamorous, but some are totally outrageous. Magazines, TV shows and the Internet all tout the latest, richest, hippest, most beautiful, most popular megastar. There is a new multi-million dollar celebrity to watch every minute. The silent question all these images ask is: “Wouldn’t you like to be as rich/famous/happy as I am?”

If you are reading this article, you probably practice the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin, and are a member of the SGI-USA. Or you’re at least interested in learning more about this Buddhism. In any case, you are undoubtedly human, and so are not immune to the “winds of fame and fortune [which] blow violently” (MW, vol. 1, p. 255). Fortunately, the Daishonin wrote about these winds in a letter titled “Letter to Niike.”

This letter was written to the Daishonin’s disciple, the samurai Niike, in order to convince him of the joy of practicing Buddhism and of the need to continue in his journey of faith. But his warnings apply to us as well. Specifically, he says that fame and fortune are like winds and, when such winds blow, “the lamp of Buddhist practice is easily extinguished.” Which is to say human beings are naturally swayed from their noble ideals by money or fame, and even Buddhists can be easily distracted from developing their mind of faith.

But why is faith necessary? Many of us practice Buddhism in order to establish happiness in our lives and fulfill our desires, so if our desires are fulfilled, isn’t that the point of our Buddhist practice? In this letter the Daishonin reminds Niike that the treasures we gain from our practice are fundamentally about improving our character and our state of life. Fame, fortune, status — none of these things guarantees happiness. In fact: “Once one falls into such an evil state, even a throne or the title of general means nothing. He is no different from a monkey on a string, tormented by the guards of hell. What use are his fame and fortune then?”

Buddhism is not separate from life; it is life itself. Becoming successful in all aspects of our lives — in our families, in our careers, in our interactions with others — all of this is part of our Buddhist practice. Based on the principle of cause and effect, as we struggle hard in our practice and each day move closer to our Buddhahood, it is natural that we will succeed in the world. But such success follows our growth as people. Developing ourselves is the point of our faith — success follows from that. However, putting worldly success first is like putting the cart before the horse, and we can, without realizing it, forget the point of Buddhist practice — our ultimate growth as human beings.

So, how do we stand firm against the winds that threaten our growth? The Daishonin tells us, “Strive ever harder in faith and never give in to negligence. Everyone appears to believe sincerely when he first embraces the Lotus Sutra, but as time passes, he tends to become less devout...” Fame and fortune are passing. The universe is eternal. Our Buddha nature, which is made of the same stuff as the cosmos, is likewise everlasting.

The point is that we must be careful not to abandon that practice as our status in the world grows. In this way, it follows that the more success we have, the more earthly desires we are likely to face. But we can use these obstacles as opportunities to strengthen our faith even more. In this case, our development in faith leads to success in our lives, and this success in turn fuels our development as people.

However, we know that when faced with difficulties, it can become a challenge to con-

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tinue in one's Buddhist practice. Some days it may be easy to sit and chant to the Gohonzon and to find faith. Other days it might seem like an impossible task. The important thing is consistency. "Keep learning from [the Daishonin] the truth of Buddhism and continue your journey of faith."

In other words, continue to study, to chant and to take action. In a recent "Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra," President Ikeda noted: "If you're going to practice Buddhism anyway, you might as well enjoy it rather than complain about it! When you're faced with a challenge, do you sigh deeply and say, 'Oh no, not again?' Or do you confront it head-on, determined to use the situation to accumulate still more good fortune? This slight distinction in attitude makes a world of difference in the end" (June *Living Buddhism*).

In the same "Dialogue," Soka Gakkai Study Department Chief Katsuji Saito states: "No matter how wealthy one may be, material possessions themselves cannot enable one to grasp life's fundamental issues, like old age and death. That's why it's necessary to teach people about the Law" (*ibid.*).

The writings of Nichiren Daishonin are living documents. They speak to us today with compassion and wisdom. Read them. Chant with them in your mind and heart. Live them with your life. Speak to others about your faith and your practice. Use hardship to develop your life and your faith. Worldly success — becoming famous, becoming wealthy, or even just gaining recognition for our accomplishments — all this is great, but developing our Buddha nature and contributing to the happiness of others is the greatest kind of success we can accomplish. Run the race of life to the absolute finish line, and you will be a true victor.

SUGGESTIONS AND IDEAS FOR YOUTH STUDY MEETINGS

- 1) Find passages in this letter and share your thoughts on why they are meaningful.
- 2) Using the article "Standing Firm in Our Journey of Faith" as a basis for the meeting, ask people why they practice Buddhism.
- 3) Read the story of the Kankucho bird. Ask people what this story means to them. What Buddhist principles does it elucidate?
- 4) Discuss the various passages in this letter that warn us not to be deceived by appearances, and to seek a true teacher regardless of his or her superficial appearance. Use parts of this letter as examples. "... even if one embraces, reads, and praises the Lotus Sutra, if he betrays its intent, he will be destroying not only Shakyamuni but all other Buddhas in the universe" (p. 253). And "No matter how learned a person may appear, if his ideas are warped you should not listen to him. ... But if a person has the wisdom to know the spirit of the Lotus Sutra, no matter how lowly he may appear, worship him and serve him as though he were a living Buddha" (p. 257). Why does the Daishonin make this point so insistently? What lesson does this impart in our own practice? This might be a good way to discuss the distinction between the SGI and the temple, and to open a discussion about the entire temple issue.

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