

YOUTH STUDY SEPTEMBER
“LETTER TO NIIKE”
THE MAJOR WRITINGS OF NICHIREN DAISHONIN, VOL.1, PP. 253–62

This month, we'd like to present a few passages and some discussion about each one.

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter in 1280 to a samurai who lived in an area of Japan called Niike. Remember, this was toward the end of the Daishonin's life. He inscribed the Dai-Gohonzon in 1279, and he passed away in 1282.

PASSAGE 1.

At the end of this letter, the Daishonin writes:

“Have the priest who is my messenger read this letter to you. Trust him as a priest with enlightened wisdom and ask him any questions you may have about Buddhism. If you do not question and resolve your doubts, you cannot dispel the dark clouds of illusion, any more than you could travel a thousand miles without legs. Have him read this letter again and again and ask whatever questions you wish” (pp. 261–62).

The Daishonin is encouraging his followers to study, and more importantly, to ask questions. Often, we think if we have doubts or questions that this means that our faith is weak, or that we lack understanding. But he also tells us that if we take our practice seriously, we must “question and resolve our doubts.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. Have you ever been afraid to question Buddhism, or question your beliefs?**
- 2. How is the kind of faith developed by seeking answers different from “blind faith” or “blind belief”?**

PASSAGE 2.

“Attaining Buddhahood is nothing extraordinary. If you chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with your whole heart, you will naturally become endowed with the Buddha's thirty-two features and eighty characteristics... Therefore it is not difficult to become a Buddha. A bird's egg contains nothing but liquid, yet by itself this develops into a beak, two eyes, and all the other parts which form a bird, and can fly into the sky. We, too, are like the egg, ignorant and base, but when nurtured by the chanting of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we develop the beak of the Buddha's thirty-two features and the feathers of his eighty characteristics and are free to soar into the skies of the ultimate reality” (pp. 259–60).

Attaining enlightenment seems like such an abstract thing, something vague that doesn't have much to do with our lives. But in this passage, the Daishonin tells us that Buddhahood is a completely natural part of our lives. If we simply dedicate ourselves to our practice, we will naturally, over time, develop the powerful life-condition of the Buddha. It's important, too, that through this example, he is teaching us that the goal of Buddhism is not for someone else to save us, but rather for us to develop our own lives.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. Have you ever looked at the inside of an egg and thought about how it could actually become a bird? What do you think of this example? Do you see your life as a work in progress?**
- 2. Not all eggs become birds. What might prevent you from developing as a person or your potential? How can you ensure that you continue to develop?**
- 3. Can you think of an example in your own life where you naturally developed into a better person?**

PASSAGE 3.

“There are two kinds of understanding, true and perverted. No matter how learned a person may appear, if his ideas are warped you should not listen to him. Nor should you follow priests merely because they are venerable or of high rank. 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).

Many priests of the Daishonin’s time were powerful, influential and widely respected in society. In contrast, Nichiren Daishonin and his followers were persecuted and virtually regarded as outlaws. The Daishonin criticized established religions because they taught that the path to salvation was in following priests. He stressed that these people distorted Buddhism for their own purposes. He said that the real meaning of Buddhism was that each person could attain enlightenment through his or her own effort and practice. In this passage, he tells his disciples that you should judge people by how well they really understand Buddhism. No matter how virtuous someone appears, if they teach you that your happiness depends on following them, they are distorting the spirit of the Lotus Sutra.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. Does it surprise you that the Daishonin would be critical of priests? Why or why not? How do you feel about it—should you judge a person by their actions or by their titles or positions?**
- 2. What is the spirit of the Lotus Sutra? How can you tell the difference between someone who really knows “the spirit of the Lotus Sutra” and someone who simply appears or pretends to have strong faith?**

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