

BUDDHIST CONCEPT FOR TODAY'S LIVING (11)
THE THREE POWERFUL ENEMIES:
CORRUPT RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND MAHAYANA BUDDHISM

As Mahayana Buddhism¹ was gaining popularity in India around the first century, there seems to have been a sense of urgency among Mahayana practitioners. The increasing corruption of the Buddhist clergy and their attack on the popular Mahayana movement was the cause of their concern. These practitioners felt responsible to protect what they believed to be Shakyamuni's central teaching, which is to recognize the Buddha nature in all people and help them manifest it through Buddhist practice.

Some Buddhist scriptures suggest that Shakyamuni's teaching in India, which was supposed to last one thousand years, would perish after five-hundred years.² The Mahayana practitioners around the first century were sensing the approach of the end of Shakyamuni's teachings. The various Mahayana sutras compiled around this time, including the Lotus Sutra, reflect this sense of urgency.

The concluding verse section of the "Encouraging Devotion" (13th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra describes the "three powerful enemies"—a concept later elaborated on by the eighth-century Chinese priest Miao-lo³. The Lotus Sutra speaks of those who will oppress the sutra's practitioners after the Buddha's death. The bodhisattvas who appear in the sutra pledge to the Buddha that they will spread their mentor's teaching after he is gone and describe the obstacles that they will face in the future. Of the first enemy they say: "There will be many ignorant people / who will curse and speak ill of us / and will attack us with swords and staves, / but we will endure all these things" (LS13, 193). They describe the second enemy as follows: "In that evil age there will be monks / with perverse wisdom and hearts that are fawning and crooked / who will suppose they have attained what they have not attained, / being proud and boastful in heart" (LS13, 193). The sutra depicts the third and most powerful enemy as follows: "Or there will be forest-dwelling monks / wearing clothing of patched rags and living in retirement, / who will claim they are practicing the true way, / despising and looking down on all humankind" (LS13, 193).

The first enemy indicates those who out of ignorance verbally and physically abuse the Mahayana practitioners. To dampen their hostility, it is important to correct their misunderstanding and communicate the true message of Buddhism to them. In this sense, the Mahayana practitioners' real enemy is people's ignorance of Buddhism and its teachings of equality and respect for human life. The second enemy is defined as those monks or priests who possess a distorted understanding of Buddhism and therefore slander the sutra's votaries. In this instance, the real enemy is the arrogance of those clergy who assume that their understanding is superior while it is in fact deficient, and look down on genuine practitioners.

The third enemy is considered the most powerful because what they really are is so different from what they seem to be. They are therefore extremely hard to identify.

Dressed in the robes of humble priests, they inhabit temples in areas remote from the center of society. But in their hearts, they despise ordinary people and view them simply as objects to be exploited. The sutra explains: "Greedy for profit and support, / they will preach the Law to white-robed laymen / and will be respected and revered by the world / as though they were arhats who possess the six transcendental powers" (LS13, 193–94). "White-robed laymen" here refers to wealthy, influential lay patrons. Such priests endeavor to pass themselves off as saints possessing supernatural powers and thereby gain respect

from the masses. To do this, they depend on the people remaining ignorant of Buddhism. Furthermore, they cleverly attack genuine Buddhist practitioners for preaching “non-Buddhist doctrines” and incite “the rulers” and “high ministers” to oppress the Buddha’s disciples (LS13, 194).

Hypocrisy is thus the true nature of the third of the three powerful enemies. In fact, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines hypocrisy in a way that well describes their tendency: “The assuming of a false appearance of virtue or goodness, with dissimulation of real character or inclinations, esp. in respect of religious life or beliefs.”

The false nature of the appearance of this third enemy is difficult to identify precisely because it is that of a highly respected religious authority. The descriptions in the sutra, however, provide some clues to perceiving the third enemy’s true nature. For example, such saintly looking yet corrupt priests tend to live away from society perhaps to create a sense of longing among their followers. True Buddhist practitioners, however, practice among the people, striving to awaken them to their supreme potential of Buddhahood. Many early Buddhist scriptures record Shakyamuni constantly traveling to preach his Dharma to the people. He is said to have visited the city of Rajagriha more than 120 times and Shravasti more than nine hundred times. The same was true of Nichiren Daishonin; judging from many of his writings, he deeply cherished his encounters and interactions with ordinary people, paying careful attention to the circumstances and welfare of each of his followers.

Vasubandhu,⁴ an Indian Buddhist scholar from the fourth or fifth century, points out in his *Treaty of Analyses of the Law* (Skt *Abhidharma-kosha-shastra*) that the Buddhist Order may be destroyed not by nuns or lay followers, but by monks. The higher the status a religious practitioner possesses, the greater the temptation to abuse that religious authority for selfish gain. This is why Vasubandhu warned monks to be strict with themselves and encouraged the rest of the Buddhist community to remain vigilant. In this regard, the Lotus Sutra describes how those in religious authority succumb to their own devilish desire to seek selfish gain and oppress the Buddha’s real disciples: “Evil demons will take possession of others / and through them curse, revile and heap shame on us” (LS13, 194). The underlying nature of the third powerful enemy lies in the dark human desire to control and oppress others for one’s own pleasure and gain. Buddhism describes such an insidious aspect of human nature as “the devil king of the sixth heaven.” To challenge this third powerful enemy, then, is to challenge this “devil” lurking not only in the lives of those in power and authority, but also in our own lives.

Those who compiled the Mahayana sutras, including the Lotus, were deeply aware of the importance of overcoming obstacles stemming from ignorance, arrogance and selfishness, especially those brought on by corrupt religious authority. In the “Encouraging Devotion” chapter, the Buddha’s disciples pledge to their teacher: “We care nothing for our bodies or lives / but are anxious only for the unsurpassed way. In ages to come we will protect and uphold / what the Buddha has entrusted to us” (LS13, 194–95). The integrity of Buddhism hinges upon whether its practitioners challenge corruption within the Buddhist community. As the Mahayana practitioners at the beginning of the first millennium experienced, when Buddhism takes root in the lives of ordinary people, opposition arises. The lesson that those Mahayana bodhisattvas learned also applies to us as we launch our popular Buddhist movement into the third millennium. To ignore the obstacles presented by the three powerful enemies is to ignore “the Buddha’s orders” (LS13, 195) to protect the integrity of his teaching after his death.

By Shin Yatomi, associate editor, based on *Yasashii Kyogaku* (Easy Buddhist Study), published by the Seikyo Press in 1994.

1. Mahayana means a “greater vehicle” that enables all people to attain enlightenment. The Mahayana Buddhist movement started out essentially as a lay movement, and its practitioners were critical of monastic Buddhism for its insularity from the populace, calling it Hinayana or a “lesser vehicle.”

2. Hirakawa, Akira. *Daijo Bukkyo Nyumon* (A Guide to Mahayana Buddhism). Tokyo: Daisanbunmeisha, 1998. p. 164.

3. Miao-lo (711-782): The sixth patriarch of the T’ien-t’ai school in China, counting from T’ien-t’ai. He is revered as the restorer of the school and wrote commentaries on T’ien-t’ai’s major works, contributing to a clarification of the school’s teachings.

4. Vasubandhu (n.d.): A Buddhist scholar in India thought to have lived around the fourth or fifth century. He is known as the author of *The Dharma Analysis Treasury*. He originally studied Hinayana but was later converted to Mahayana by his elder brother Asanga. He wrote numerous treatises designed to clarify the Mahayana teachings.