

**STUDY MATERIAL FOR AUGUST
LETTER TO MISAWA
(THE WRITINGS OF NICHIREN DAISHONIN, P. 894-95;
GOSHO ZENSHU, PP. 1487-88)**

The following is an excerpt from a letter Nichiren Daishonin wrote to one of his followers, which is known today as “Letter to Misawa.” This is the study material for August study meetings in the SGI-USA.

Although people study Buddhism, it is difficult for them to practice it correctly either because of the ignorance of their minds, or because, even though wise, they fail to realize that they are being misled by their teachers.

Moreover, even though one may encounter a wise teacher and the true sutra and thereby embrace the correct teaching, when one resolves to break free from the sufferings of birth and death and attain Buddhahood,¹ one will inevitably encounter seven grave matters known as the three obstacles and four devils,² just as surely as a shadow follows the body and clouds accompany rain. Even if you should manage to overcome the first six, if you are defeated by the seventh, you will not be able to become a Buddha.

Let us leave the first six for now. The seventh is caused by the devil king of the sixth heaven.³ When an ordinary person of the latter age is ready to attain Buddhahood, having realized the essence of all the sacred teachings of the Buddha’s lifetime and understood the heart of the important teaching set forth in Great Concentration and Insight,⁴ this devil is greatly surprised. He says to himself, “This is most vexing. If I allow this person to remain in my domain, he not only will free himself from the sufferings of birth and death, but will lead others to enlightenment as well. Moreover, he will take over my realm and change it into a pure land. What shall I do?” The devil king then summons all his underlings from the threefold world of desire, form, and formlessness⁵ and tells them: “Each of you now must go and harass that votary, according to your respective skills. If you should fail to make him abandon his Buddhist practice, then enter into the minds of his disciples, lay supporters, and the people of his land and thus try to persuade or threaten him. If these attempts are also unsuccessful, I myself will go down and possess the mind and body of his sovereign to persecute that votary. Together, how can we fail to prevent him from attaining Buddhahood?”

I, Nichiren, have long been aware of all this and therefore know how difficult it is for an ordinary person of the latter age to become a Buddha in this lifetime.

BACKGROUND

Written in the fourth year of Kenji (1278), this letter is also referred to as “Before and after Sado” because it makes a clear distinction between the teachings the Daishonin expounded before his exile to Sado Island and those he revealed during and after his Sado exile. He compares the former to the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings, which Shakyamuni preached as an expedient to lead his disciples to the Lotus Sutra. Concerning his true teaching, the Daishonin says, “I secretly conveyed my teaching to my disciples from the province of Sado.” Quoting the Buddha’s words, he refers to that teaching simply as “this great Law.” This teaching is explained more precisely in two of his most important writings, “The Opening of the Eyes” and “The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind.”

The recipient of this letter is generally believed to be Misawa Kojiro, a lay follower of the

Daishonin who was the lord of Misawa in Fuji District of Suruga Province, though some consider it to have been given to Kojiro's grandson, Masahiro.

Misawa appears to have kept his distance from the Daishonin for fear of antagonizing and arousing the suspicions of the Kamakura shogunate. But the Daishonin expresses understanding of his position as the lord of a manor responsible for a fief, family, and retainers, and kindly encourages him. (From *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 898)

COMMENTARY

Overcoming “the three obstacles and the four devils”

After thanking the letter's recipient for various offerings, Nichiren Daishonin explains why it is difficult to bring forth one's supreme potential of Buddhahood. In this letter the Daishonin gives two reasons. First, people fail to practice Buddhism correctly either because of “the ignorance of their minds” or “being misled by their teachers.” Second, even if people encounter true Buddhism and its correct teacher, they are often prevented from attaining enlightenment by “the three obstacles and the four devils.” The “three obstacles and the four devils” describe an array of potential negative influences that can hamper one's Buddhist practice and prevent one from attaining Buddhahood. Put another way, however, while these stumbling blocks prevent some people from revealing their Buddhahood, for others they function as an impetus or stimulus. By struggling against them, people can bring forth their enlightened potential, thus attaining Buddhahood. If “ignorance,” “misleading teachers” and “the three obstacles and four devils” function to prevent people from attaining Buddhahood, then working to overcome ignorance, seeking a correct teacher and struggling against the three obstacles and four devils are certainly the way to attain Buddhahood. Exerting ourselves sincerely in the faith, practice and study of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is the surest and most direct way to accomplish this.

Overcoming Ignorance and Finding the Right Teacher

When the Daishonin refers to “the ignorance of their minds,” he does not simply mean people's ignorance of Buddhism. Of course, it is important to study Buddhism, especially the Daishonin's writings, so that we may deepen and strengthen our faith through understanding. But amassing knowledge of Buddhism alone is not protection against the kind of “ignorance” the Daishonin refers to here. Even the most erudite Buddhist scholars may fall victim to emotionalism or be guided by pettiness if they are not aware of and able to bring forth the real potential for Buddhahood that all people possess. This ignorance of the mind, then, actually refers to a lack of faith in the real essence of Buddhism.

To find a correct teacher of Buddhism, one must be able to determine who is practicing Buddhism most diligently and sincerely, in exact accord with its teachings. If our judgment in this regard is swayed by someone's status, position or appearance, then we are succumbing to “ignorance.” Nichiren Daishonin set the example of what it means to be a practitioner and a teacher of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni Buddha's highest teaching, and more specifically of the Mystic Law contained in the sutra. The Daishonin's example as a votary of the essence of Buddhism is clearly set forth in his writings. Today it is those who carry out faith, practice and study exactly as Nichiren Daishonin teaches—being diligent in one's own practice while striving to teach others and to spread the humane ideals of Buddhism to society—who can be called correct teachers of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

In “The Opening of the Eyes,” Nichiren Daishonin writes, “Even if the votary of the Lotus Sutra were an ape rather than a man, they (the Buddhist gods) should address him as the votary of the Lotus Sutra, and rush forward to fulfill the vow they made before the Buddha.” Votary in this sense means “one who truly practices.” In other words, it is not appearance or status or title, but whether one is truly practicing and realizing the power of Buddhism in one’s life that qualifies one as a teacher of Buddhism. And just as one should not discriminate against a teacher because of his or her position or status, neither should a teacher discriminate against practitioners.

The Daishonin does not discuss the problems stemming from ignorance or following a wrong teacher in this letter, but they are nonetheless important in that they can prevent us from revealing our own Buddha nature and thus becoming truly happy.

One who purports to be a teacher of Buddhism while discriminating against practitioners due to status, position or wealth, does not qualify as a teacher at all.

The Three Obstacles

As the Daishonin reminds us in this letter, we “will inevitably encounter . . . the three obstacles and four devils” as we make significant progress in our practice. It is not a matter of if, but when. What matters is our readiness to face and win over those hindrances that lie in our path on the way to absolute happiness. The “three obstacles” are various workings that prevent us from practicing Buddhism; they arise from earthly desires, karma and retribution, respectively.

The Daishonin explains: “The obstacle of earthly desires is the impediments to one’s practice that arise from greed, anger, foolishness, and the like” (WND, 501). Some may quit their Buddhist practice because they place the fulfillment of immediate desires above Buddhism, which leads to ultimate enlightenment. In other words, they are more concerned with short-term gain than the truly rewarding growth and benefit that is possible through persevering in Buddhist practice. With such an attitude, even a relatively minor difficulty may cause one to quit. Others may renounce their faith because of emotionalism—likes or dislikes as mentioned above. Such individuals typically find reason to resent a fellow practitioner, and abandon their faith in order to avoid or to spite that person. These are examples of the “obstacle of earthly desires.”

Regarding the obstacle of karma, the Daishonin states that it is “the hindrances presented by one’s wife or children” (WND, 501). The obstacle of karma refers to our fundamental karmic orientations that make us go astray from the correct path of Buddhism. As the Daishonin’s example suggests, some may give up their practice simply to appease family members or loved ones who may themselves fear or resent that person’s Buddhist practice, the time it requires, or the criticism it might invite from the wider community.

The obstacle of retribution refers to the hostile circumstances into which one is born as karmic retribution for actions against the Mystic Law in past lifetimes; it refers especially to obstacles caused by authority figures. If those born into a society or community that harbors enmity toward Buddhism allow their circumstances to quash their Buddhist practice, then they are succumbing to the obstacle of retribution. In this regard, the Daishonin states: “The obstacle of retribution is the hindrances caused by one’s sovereign or parents” (WND, 501).

The Four Devils

The “four devils” refers to various negative workings of life and the universe—not to actual

demonic beings. These workings torment the body and mind of a Buddhist practitioner. The Sanskrit word for devil, Mara, was translated into Chinese variously as “robber of life,” “killer,” and “destroyer.” As those translations indicate, “devils” in Buddhism may be thought of as metaphors for functions destructive to the lives of the Buddhist practitioners in particular and people in general. In one sense, this is similar to Christianity in that it identifies Satan with forces destructive to life and as “a murderer from the beginning” (John 8: 44).

Specifically the “four devils” refers to the hindrance of earthly desires, the hindrance of the five components, the hindrance of death, and the hindrance of the devil king. The hindrance of earthly desires indicates the function of people’s baser desires and impulses to weaken their resolve to seek Buddhism and thus corrupt their lives.

The “five components” are five physical and mental elements that constitute our existence—they indicate the physical and spiritual makeup of the human being. Our physical or physiological component is called “form,” and our mental functions include the compounds of “perception,” “conception,” “volition” and “consciousness.” Buddhism explains that those five components unite temporarily and give rise to an individual living being. We may interpret the hindrance of the five components as disharmony among those five components that creates physical and mental suffering, stifling the purity of one’s condition and obscuring one’s innate wisdom.

The hindrance of death refers to anything that functions to cause the death of a Buddhist practitioner, and thereby prevent that person’s Buddhist practice. However, we can define it more broadly to include fear or apprehension over the possibility of one’s own death, or discouragement and doubt brought about by the death of a fellow practitioner. If we fear or are discouraged by death, and as a consequence become confused and backslide in faith, we are succumbing to the hindrance of death.

Seeing the “devil king” Within

In this letter, the Daishonin explains the workings of the last and most powerful hindrance, the “devil king.” Buddhist scripture frequently refers to such beings as demons, devils, benevolent deities and gods. The Daishonin’s Buddhism interprets these as representing the workings of life and the universe. In this regard, the Daishonin states in “The Treatment of Illness”:

The heart of the Lotus school is the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, which reveals that both good and evil are inherent even in those at the highest stage of perfect enlightenment. The fundamental nature of enlightenment manifests itself as Brahma and Shakra⁶, whereas the fundamental darkness manifests itself as the devil king of the sixth heaven. The benevolent deities hate evildoers, and evil demons hate good people. (WND, 1113)

Here the Daishonin teaches that good and evil—life-affirming and life-negating functions—are inherent in all people, including Buddhas. Ignorant of this, some people allow their inherent life-negating nature to go unchecked and bring misery upon themselves and others. Buddhas, however, are fully aware of their own potentials—both good and evil.

Instead of succumbing to destructive desires, Buddhas’ lives are rooted firmly in their life-affirming nature, specifically the supreme state of life called Buddhahood that is rich with compassion and wisdom. Once this state is attained, however, it does not simply

persist of its own accord. One does not become or remain a Buddha through inattentiveness or inaction. As the Daishonin explains, even within the lives of Buddhas “the fundamental darkness” still exists. This tells us something important about our Buddhist practice: Buddhas are those who are aware of their innate fundamental darkness and always strive to challenge their weaknesses. Put another way, to reveal our innate Buddhahood and make it our foundation we need to see and strive against our innate life-negating nature. Just as a body builder cannot remain a body builder without continuing to work out, or as a scholar cannot remain a scholar without continuing to study, a Buddha cannot remain a Buddha without continual effort and vigilance to challenge and win over his or her own weakness and ignorance.

The “fundamental darkness” that the Daishonin mentions is our ignorance of or disbelief in the Buddhahood within our lives as well as the lives of all people. While ignorant of this supreme universal potential, people tend toward despair rather than hope, cruelty instead of compassion, foolishness rather than wisdom, and cowardice instead of courage. People who are steeped in their fundamental darkness are essentially insecure about themselves, so they are inclined to slight others and ignore or even derive satisfaction from others’ misery. Out of insecurity comes arrogance. Great insecurity can give rise to an irrepressible urge to control others. An intense desire for control typifies those who act as “the devil king.”

It should be noted in the devil king’s monologue that his vexation stems from his potential loss of control over his “domain.” He fears people learning of their true potential and becoming self-reliant. Self-aware and self-empowered people will make “the devil king” feel even more deeply his misery that stems from his disbelief in the supreme potential of Buddhahood. They will remind him of his real weakness, which he covers over with self-importance. This is why the devil king says to himself: “This is most vexing. If I allow this person to remain in my domain, he not only will free himself from the sufferings of birth and death, but will lead others to enlightenment as well. Moreover, he will take over my realm and change it into a pure land. What shall I do?”

The important thing to keep in mind is that this “devil king” lurks in the innermost depths of everyone’s life. When this potential is unchecked and becomes dominant, we truly become “little devils.” It is therefore important to always be vigilant toward our innate fundamental darkness and not succumb to it. To fight “the devil king” within, we need to develop our confidence in the existence of Buddhahood both in our lives and those of others. This is why the Daishonin states: “The sharp sword to cut through the fundamental darkness is faith alone” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 751).

To Challenge Injustice Outside is to Reveal Buddhahood Inside

The “devil king” is sometimes referred to as “the devil of the sixth heaven” because he is said to dwell in the highest of the six heavens of the world of desire. In ancient Indian Buddhist cosmology, this highest heaven in the world of desire was associated with the desire to exploit others for one’s own pleasure. In this sense, the “devil king” symbolizes our tendency to view other human beings as means to gratify our own wants and wishes. When people are dehumanized and reduced to means for some end, profound suffering can result—war being one of the most hideous examples. This is why the Daishonin was relentless in speaking out against the corrupt religious authority of his day who tried to obscure the fundamentally self-empowering truth of Buddhism contained in the Lotus Sutra. The eminent priests grew concerned about the spread of the Daishonin’s teaching and induced the government to persecute him, which ultimately led to a failed attempt to

execute him and then to his exile to Sado Island in 1271.

Since the “fundamental darkness” finds expression in the desire to control others for selfish gratification, those in positions of influence may be especially susceptible to the working of the “devil king”. In this regard, the Daishonin has the metaphorical devil king say before his underlings: “Each of you now must go and harass that votary, according to your respective skills. If you should fail to make him abandon his Buddhist practice, then enter into the minds of his disciples, lay supporters, and the people of his land and thus try to persuade or threaten him. If these attempts are also unsuccessful, I myself will go down and possess the mind and body of his sovereign to persecute that votary. Together, how can we fail to prevent him from attaining Buddhahood?”

Subservience as the Flip-Side of Arrogance

It is, however, important to note that the “fundamental darkness” can sometimes manifest itself as self-disparagement and servile obedience to external authority. On the surface, the domineering autocrat and the cowardly sycophant seem to represent opposite extremes: wanting to control and wanting to be controlled. However, both of these tendencies stem from lack of confidence and belief in the supreme potential we hold within. People who believe they cannot change for the better - who deny their own potential—act in one of two ways. First, they may give up their power, feeling no hope of controlling their destiny and thus assigning that control to others. Second, they may become arrogant. Because they inwardly do not believe they can improve, they try to justify themselves as they are to convince themselves and others of their greatness. By trying to gain power over others, they avoid looking at their own shortcomings, which they despise. They interpret others’ deference toward them as affirming their own greatness. Actually, the creation of any tyranny or authoritarian system requires the existence of both types of people. We might say that the tendencies of those who have succumbed to their inner “devil king” are different only in the direction of manifestation—controlling or servile. What they have in common at their root is a deep insecurity and lack of confidence. Whether tyrants or obsequious subjects—both have essentially chosen their “fundamental darkness” over their “fundamentally enlightened nature.” Neither are ever truly free.

As the Daishonin allegorically alludes to in this letter, the prominent priests and government officials of his day had allowed their fundamental darkness to dominate their lives and thus exploited people while persecuting the Daishonin and his fellow practitioners. Furthermore, the majority of the people had chosen the path of spiritual subservience to these authorities. Under such circumstances, despite severe persecutions, the Daishonin ceaselessly spread his message about the universality of Buddhahood, proving himself to be a true votary of the Lotus Sutra. In this regard, the Daishonin states: “[Despite the personal interference of the devil king of the sixth heaven] it is because the heavenly deities came to my aid that I survived even at Tatsunokuchi, and also emerged safely from other great persecutions. By now, the devil king must be discouraged” (GZ, 843).

Action Vanquishes Fundamental Darkness

Through his own example, the Daishonin teaches us the importance of speaking the truth of Buddhism while challenging injustice in order to reveal our innate Buddhahood. Our lives are intrinsically endowed with both “fundamental darkness” and “fundamental enlightenment.” If we simply do nothing, we will be overcome by fundamental darkness. To reveal our fundamental nature of enlightenment, we need to reaffirm continuously the

existence of Buddhahood within ourselves and others.

For purposes of clarification, we might describe this as comprising four categories of activity: The first is striving to recognize, tap and bring forth our own enlightened nature by praying earnestly and consistently to the Gohonzon. This includes always working to improve our daily practice of Gongyo and Daimoku, setting clear goals in our lives, and praying to achieve them.

The second is making efforts to help others do the same thing. This means to share the great benefit and power of the Daishonin's Buddhism with others so that they too may accumulate good fortune and experience personal growth. It also means to support the activities of the SGI to share the humane, non-violent ideals of Buddhism with society and the world at large.

The third is looking within our lives to identify the causes of our suffering. We need to recognize the weaknesses or habits that hold us back in our daily lives and in our faith—the weaknesses that spring from our fundamental darkness—and work to gain control over them. To this end, we try to expose ourselves to good influences and learn from good examples, which may include our efforts in study and seeking advice from those with more experience in faith and practice.

And the fourth is challenging and working to transform the fundamental darkness in others—speaking with courage and conviction to convince people not to give up their power, not to become slaves to authority, while at the same time exposing the function of the “devil king” within unjust authority. Specifically, we stand on the side of ordinary people who are trying to improve their lives through Buddhist practice and point out the errors of any person or power that aims to stifle or usurp their right to do so. This is the essence of the “Soka Spirit.”

These four kinds of activity are listed here not to imply any specific order or approach. They may overlap and any one can involve elements of the others. This example is intended to express our need to develop the positive aspects—the fundamental enlightenment—within self and other, and to challenge and overcome the negativity—the fundamental darkness—within self and other.

When we exert ourselves in these areas, we become aware of our own fundamental darkness so that we may challenge it. By doing so we manifest and solidify our innate fundamental nature of enlightenment. In this letter, the Daishonin says: “I, Nichiren, have long been aware of all this.” This is noteworthy. Because the Daishonin was keenly aware of his own fundamental darkness and its function in others, he was able to perceive the nature of persecution and overcome it. Here the Daishonin teaches us that as long as our faith in our fundamental nature of enlightenment is solid and we are vigilant against our fundamental darkness, we can transmute the workings of “the devil king” both inside and outside.

Challenge Difficulties With Courage

In this letter, the Daishonin states: “When one resolves to break free from the sufferings of birth and death and attain Buddhahood, one will inevitably encounter seven grave matters known as the three obstacles and four devils, just as surely as a shadow follows the body and clouds accompany rain.” If we adopt the Daishonin's perspective on life's hardships, whatever seems to hold back our Buddhist practice and our lives in general will be transformed into an opportunity to demonstrate our supreme potential. In a different letter, “The Three and Four Devils,” the Daishonin emphasizes challenging difficulties with courage and optimism instead of succumbing to fear and despair:

“You should not have the slightest fear in your heart. It is lack of courage that prevents one from attaining Buddhahood, although one may have professed faith in the Lotus Sutra many times since innumerable kalpas ago....Something uncommon also occurs when an ordinary person attains Buddhahood. At such a time, the three obstacles and four devils will invariably appear, and the wise will rejoice while the foolish will retreat” (WND, 637).

Life’s hardships can cause despair and suffering; however, they can also be a source of hope and happiness. The Daishonin teaches that it is up to us to decide what we make of our lives and that courageous faith ultimately enables us to defeat “the three obstacles and the four devils” and realize genuine happiness.

The Daishonin’s allegorical devil king, despite all his malice and evil, knows one important truth. He knows that even one person truly awakened can reclaim the devil’s entire domain and lead many others to the same state of spiritual freedom. Recognizing this “power of one person” may be an important lesson we can learn from the “devil king.”

□

By the SGI-USA Study Department

1. Also referred to by the word enlightenment. The supreme state of life in Buddhism, characterized by boundless wisdom and compassion. In this state one is awakened to the eternal and ultimate truth that is the reality of all things. Buddhahood is regarded as the goal of Buddhist practice and the highest of the Ten Worlds.
2. Various obstacles and hindrances to the practice of Buddhism. Three obstacles are: (1) the obstacle of earthly desires; (2) the obstacle of karma, which may also refer to opposition from one’s spouse or children; and (3) the obstacle of retribution, also obstacles caused by one’s superiors, such as rulers or parents. The four devils are: (1) the hindrance of the five components; (2) the hindrance of earthly desires; (3) the hindrance of death, because untimely death obstructs one’s practice of Buddhism or because the premature death of another practitioner causes doubts; and (4) the hindrance of the devil king.
3. The king of devils, who dwells in the highest of the six heavens of the world of desire. He works to obstruct Buddhist practice and delights in sapping the life force of other beings. He is also regarded as the manifestation of the fundamental darkness inherent in life. Also called the heavenly devil.
4. One of T’ien-t’ai’s three major works. This work clarifies the principle of three thousand realms in a single moment of life based on the Lotus Sutra. And it elucidates the method of meditation for observing one’s mind and realizing the principle within oneself.
5. The world of unenlightened beings who transmigrate within the six paths of existence (i.e., the lower six states of the Ten Worlds, which are Hell, Hunger, Animality, Anger, Humanity and Heaven). They are: (1) the world of desire, ruled by various desires; (2) the world of form, whose inhabitants are free from all desires, cravings, and appetites but, still having material form, are subject to certain material restrictions; and (3) the world of formlessness, where the beings are free from both desires and material restrictions.
6. Shakra: Also known as Indra. Together with Brahma, one of the two principal tutelary gods of Buddhism.