

BE NEITHER INFLUENCED NOR FRIGHTENED BY OBSTACLES BY FRED ZAITSU, PUBLISHER

The doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life revealed in the fifth volume of Great Concentration and Insight is especially profound. If you propagate it, devils will arise without fail. If they did not, there would be no way of knowing that this is the correct teaching. One passage from the same volume reads, "As practice progresses and understanding grows, the three obstacles and four devils¹ emerge in confusing form, vying with one another to interfere.... One should be neither influenced nor frightened by them. If one falls under their influence, one will be led into the paths of evil. If one is frightened by them, one will be prevented from practicing the correct teaching." This statement not only applies to me but also is a guide for my disciples. Reverently make this teaching your own and transmit it as an axiom of faith for future generations. ("Letter to the Brothers," *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 501)

Background: This letter was written in 1275 to two brothers who had converted to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. Their father was a loyal follower of the Shingon priest Ryokan and opposed his sons' beliefs for more than twenty years before finally converting to the Daishonin's Buddhism himself.

The Ikegami brothers had converted to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and were consequently facing their father's strong opposition, a troubling dilemma.

The Daishonin explains to them that when we embark on the path to enlightenment, we will face opposition. By continuing our faith, however, we can overcome any obstacle. I know this to be true because the same thing happened to me.

Boxing was my favorite sport in college. It was a time in my youth when I felt invincible, full of hope and excited about my future.

This was before I became a member of the Soka Gakkai. I actually wanted nothing to do with the Soka Gakkai or any religion. I felt religion was for the weak. I was renting a room from Soka Gakkai members, and I rejected their repeated attempts to interest me in the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin. My father, who was supporting me through college, was also very much against the Soka Gakkai.

My family belonged to the Minobu sect of Nichiren Buddhism, which followed neither the teachings nor the spirit of Nichiren Daishonin.

I was soon to learn some important life lessons. First, and most devastating, concerned my health. I was diagnosed with a herniated disk in my back. I had injured it boxing. I couldn't sit for very long, I couldn't stand for very long, and I couldn't even lie down without excruciating pain. When my doctor said I needed surgery, my whole world seemed to collapse. My feeling of invincibility was shattered. I learned that no one is invincible. I was suddenly very interested in the words of my landlords concerning Buddhism and I asked them if I could receive the Gohonzon.

I began practicing and attending Gakkai activities. Almost immediately, I felt better. When I went back to the same doctor who had suggested surgery, he found no evidence that I still needed it. Everything seemed bright and hopeful again. This was my first benefit

from practicing Buddhism. Then came my first obstacle and my next lesson in life.

When my father found out that I had joined the Soka Gakkai, he was furious. My father had been paying for my tuition and rent as I furthered my education. If I didn't quit the Soka Gakkai immediately, he said he would stop supporting me. And he did. Very soon, I was out of money for food, my rent was overdue, and the college was asking about my tuition. Once again, my world seemed to be falling apart. The joy I had experienced in the beginning of my practice was shrinking. I sought the advice of a youth leader with many years of experience.

This was when I heard about "Letter to the Brothers" and the quote: "As practice progresses and understanding grows, the three obstacles and four devils emerge in confusing form, vying with one another to interfere.... One should be neither influenced nor frightened by them."

My youth leader impressed this upon me: "Don't be afraid. This is proof that you are practicing correctly. Courageously continue your practice and Gakkai activities."

He explained that the father of the Ikegami brothers threatened to disown them if they did not abandon their practice of the Daishonin's Buddhism. I couldn't believe that the very same thing was happening to me. The "Letter to the Brothers" was Nichiren Daishonin's encouragement to them and clarification of the nature of such opposition. I felt he was writing to me, seven hundred years later! My leader told me: "You mustn't be afraid! Don't give up!"

The purpose of obstacles is to strengthen our faith. This is the great lesson I learned. I continued my practice of Buddhism in the Gakkai, struggling to support myself. It was in the pressure cooker of this obstacle that I felt my life change—that I came to understand the Gohonzon a little bit. In this sense, my father was acting as a good friend to the development of my faith.

Finally, my father understood that I was not going to quit, and his attitude changed. He supported my practice, and it was wonderful. I had followed the Daishonin's words and had seen—firsthand—that they are true. If I had cut back in my practice or quit, who knows what might have happened. Toward the end of his life, my father and I chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo together.

Obstacles are like the rushing air that lifts an airplane or waves that propel a surfer. Through our faith in the Gohonzon, obstacles open up a new world to us.

In the book *For Today and Tomorrow*, SGI President Ikeda states: "In the 'Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings,' the Daishonin says, 'One should regard meeting obstacles as true peace and comfort' (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 750). You may wonder how encountering obstacles could be a source of peace and comfort. But the truth of the matter is that through struggling against and overcoming difficulties, we can transform our destiny and attain Buddhahood. Confronting adversity, therefore, represents peace and comfort."

By following the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin to never be swayed or frightened by problems, we can always overcome them. And the encouragement of our fellow SGI members and guidance of our mentor President Ikeda is invaluable. □

1. Three obstacles and four devils—Various obstacles and hindrances to the practice of Buddhism. The three obstacles are: 1) the obstacle of earthly desires; 2) the obstacle of karma, which may 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.