

THE PATH OF DIFFICULTIES LEADS TO ENLIGHTENMENT BY ALEXIS TRASS, GARY, INDIANA

“A passage from the Lotus Sutra reads that it is ‘the most difficult to believe and the most difficult to understand.’ Many hear about and accept this sutra, but when great obstacles arise, just as they are told would happen, few remember it and bear it firmly in mind. To accept is easy; to continue is difficult. But Buddhahood lies in continuing faith. Those who uphold this sutra should be prepared to meet difficulties. It is certain, however, that they will ‘quickly attain the unsurpassed Buddha way.’” (“The Difficulty of Sustaining Faith,” *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 471)

Background: This excerpt is from a short letter addressed by Nichiren Daishonin to his faithful disciple Shijo Kingo in 1275. Kingo was under great pressure from his lord, Ema, and other fellow samurai to renounce his support for the Daishonin. This letter was written to encourage Kingo and strengthen his resolve.

When I read this passage for the first time, I was feeling sorry for myself and searching for something to lift me from my funk and inspire me to wholeheartedly practice Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism. The title, “The Difficulty of Sustaining Faith,” hooked me right away, as I felt my faith was at a low point.

Nichiren Daishonin talks about hearing and accepting this sutra, but that was not my experience. I was born into this practice, so I have always known about and accepted whatever my parents told me about Buddhism. I was told to chant for what I wanted and I would get it. It sounded good to me. I was chanting for things like the newest Cabbage Patch Kid or that Santa Claus would leave more presents than he did the year before.

I didn’t have serious problems. I even remember thinking that I didn’t have to chant too much because I was born with so much fortune and my parents were chanting for me every day. I was consciously choosing to ride on their fortune for as long as I could. If anyone told me that this practice would be difficult, I was asleep during that lesson.

Fast forward to the college years. During the mid-1990s, I was a student at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. That was the first time I remember having problems I couldn’t easily solve. I had a typical college experience. I worried about my grades and how to juggle seventeen credit hours, volunteer work and a part-time job. I spent way too much time on a romantic relationship that eventually left me with a broken heart and unpleasant memories. I constantly worried about not having enough money.

I wasn’t too active as an SGI member, either. I went to meetings every once in a while, but most times, I was trying to dodge the members that were calling me about going to district meetings. Because I didn’t chant and do gongyo on a regular basis, most of my college friends had no idea that I was a Buddhist.

Some months passed and I knew that I really wanted to practice for myself, challenge my real-world problems and become strong. Soon after I renewed my practice, something happened that made me question everything I had been told about Buddhism.

After chanting daimoku about it, I had decided to join a sorority. I really wanted to be part of an organization that did community service. It was a plus that they threw great

parties. I was chosen to go on line (a probationary and initiation process) with the sorority of my choice. Being on line was not easy. All the girls who were on line were at the beck and call of the sorority members. We had to do a lot of ridiculous errands like delivering a single paper clip to another member across campus or run around town trying to find ice that was a certain size or shape. Almost every day, we would be up all evening and night standing straight with our chins up in a hot room trying not to move or show obvious signs of discomfort lest we be yelled at or forced to run in circles outside while barking. We were forbidden to make direct eye contact with a member. The whole process was completely humiliating and degrading.

I did things like that for a week and a half. I wasn't eating or sleeping. To say I felt utterly horrible during that time would be an understatement. I went in knowing that the process would be difficult and time-consuming. What I could never reconcile in my mind were my feelings about how human beings should be treated with respect versus how this sorority was treating people with a complete lack of respect. When I found time to chant, I asked the Gohonzon why I was being punished. After all, I reasoned, prayers that would make me unhappy wouldn't be answered. I was chanting, I got exactly what I wanted, and I wasn't the least bit happy.

As it turned out, that experience was one of the best things that ever happened to me. I decided not to continue the process because I was missing class and I had no time to study. I also felt I wasn't doing anything that created value for myself or others, and I saw that this sorority, not unlike many others, did not value people and was more interested in parties and appearances than being humanistic. That was the exact opposite of what I wanted, but if I had not had that experience, I don't know if I would have seen it that way.

I realized that the moment I decided to be sincere and practice with more determination, a lot of negativity came out of my life. The negativity showed itself where I was the weakest because at that time, I was looking for acceptance just about anywhere I could get it. I could have easily been shaken to the point that I would not have wanted to practice at all.

"The Difficulty of Sustaining Faith" helped me understand why I was experiencing that hardship and convinced me not to throw my practice away. I learned that my new acceptance of this practice brought out some negativity, but that was OK because I could see what I needed to change about myself. Because I had such a positive outcome from a negative experience and ended up feeling so good in the end, it was easier to keep in mind that I could become truly happy as long as I continued my faith. I feel I am at the point where I can rejoice in difficulties (although not always in the beginning) because they assure me that I am on the right path to Buddhahood.

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