

**STUDY MATERIAL FOR OCTOBER**  
**NICHIREN DAISHONIN'S WRITINGS: ON PROLONGING ONE'S LIFE SPAN**  
**(THE WRITINGS OF NICHIREN DAISHONIN, P. 954-55;**  
**GOSHO ZENSHU, P. 985)**

There are two types of illness: minor and serious. Early treatment by a skilled physician can cure even serious illnesses, not to mention minor ones. Karma also may be divided into two categories: fixed and unfixed. Sincere repentance will eradicate even fixed karma, to say nothing of karma that is unfixed. The seventh volume of the Lotus Sutra states, "This sutra provides good medicine for the ills of the people of Jambudvīpa."<sup>1</sup> These words can be found in no other sutra. All the sacred teachings of Shakyamuni's lifetime are the golden words of the Thus Come One; for countless kalpas, they have never contained the slightest falsehood. The Lotus Sutra is the truth of all truths taught by the Buddha, for it includes his declaration of "honestly discarding expedient means."<sup>2</sup> Many Treasures Buddha confirmed the truth of the Lotus Sutra, and all the other Buddhas lent their tongues in testimony. How, then, could it be false? Moreover, this sutra contains the greatest of all secrets. It tells of a woman who suffers from illness in the last five-hundred-year period of the twenty-five hundred years following the Buddha's passing.

King Ajatashatru broke out in virulent sores all over his body on the fifteenth day of the second month of his fiftieth year. Not even the skills of the great physician Jivaka were enough to cure him. It was fated that he would die on the seventh day of the third month and fall into the great citadel of the hell of incessant suffering. All the pleasures of his fifty years suddenly vanished, and the sufferings of an entire lifetime were gathered into twenty-one days. His death was predetermined by his fixed karma. But then the Buddha reiterated the teaching of the Lotus Sutra, entitling it the Nirvana Sutra and conferring it on the king. The king immediately recovered from his illness, and the grave offenses that had burdened his heart vanished like dewdrops.

More than fifteen hundred years after the Buddha passed away, there lived a man [in China] called Ch'en Chen.<sup>3</sup> It was prophesied that he would die at the age of fifty, but by following the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai, he was able to prolong his life by fifteen years and lived to be sixty-five. Bodhisattva Never Disparaging also transformed his fixed karma and prolonged his life through his practice of the Lotus Sutra. The sutra says, "His life span was increased."<sup>4</sup> The persons mentioned above were men, not women, but they prolonged their lives by practicing the Lotus Sutra. Ch'en Chen lived before the last five-hundred-year period, so his change of karma was as extraordinary as rice ripening in winter or chrysanthemums blossoming in summer. In this age, it is as natural for a woman to change her fixed karma by practicing the Lotus Sutra as it is for rice to ripen in fall or chrysanthemums to bloom in winter.

## **Background**

Nichiren Daishonin sent this letter to the lay nun<sup>5</sup> Toki, the wife of Toki Jonin in 1279. Toki Jonin was one of the Daishonin's staunchest followers. A samurai and retainer of Lord Chiba, the constable of Shimosa, Jonin had become a follower of the Daishonin around 1254, one year after the latter had declared his teaching and practice of Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō. Toki Jonin received some thirty letters from Nichiren Daishonin, including

some of his most important works. On a number of occasions, he sent questions that prompted the Daishonin to write and clarify his teachings. He also often reported to the Daishonin about the condition of believers with whom he was in contact, and received messages from the Daishonin to relay to those believers.

In the third month of 1276, Toki Jonin had made the arduous journey from Shimosa province to Minobu to visit the Daishonin, carrying with him the ashes of his recently deceased mother. Jonin reported to Nichiren Daishonin that his mother had recently passed away peacefully, and that his wife, the lay nun Toki, despite struggling with illness herself, had exhaustively cared for his mother until the end. On that occasion, the Daishonin wrote a letter known by the title “The Bow and Arrow,” and presented it to Jonin to give to his wife. In it he praised her for supporting her husband, saying: “[It is] the strength of a wife that guides the actions of her husband. In the same way, it is your support that has enabled Toki to visit me here now” (WND, 656).

In that letter, the Daishonin further says: “My greatest concern now is your illness. Fully convinced that you will recover your health, you should continue moxibustion treatment for three years, as regularly as if you had just begun. Even those who are free from illness cannot escape the transience of life, but you are not yet old, and because you are a votary of the Lotus Sutra, you will not meet an untimely death” (WND, 656).

Moxibustion was a contemporary medical treatment that involved applying heat to certain key points on the body. It is possible that Shijo Kingo, another trusted believer in the Daishonin’s teachings and a skilled medical practitioner, may have given her this advice as a sort of prescription and that the Daishonin here is encouraging her to be consistent in following that advice.

It seems that the lay nun Toki fell ill sometime in 1275, and it is quite possible that her illness was due in part to the exhausting effort of caring for her mother-in-law. In a short letter to Jonin dated the 29th day of the eleventh month, 1276, the Daishonin said, “I think of your wife’s illness as if it were my own, and am praying to heaven day and night” (*Gosho Zenshu*, 978).

In 1277, the year before this letter, “On Prolonging One’s Life Span,” was written, the Daishonin sent a letter to Jonin titled “The Treatment of Illness,” and another, dated the same day, to Shijo Kingo titled “Two Kinds of Illness.” These two letters seem to have been prompted by a report from Jonin that ongoing epidemics had been “raging all the more fiercely” (WND, 1111) in that part of Japan. The lay nun Toki may have been suffering from an illness contracted at an earlier stage of those epidemics. Nichiren Daishonin himself was struggling with an illness amid the harsh environment of Minobu, where food was scarce and shelter from the elements was far less than ideal. In “On Prolonging One’s Life Span,” the Daishonin reiterates in more detail the encouragement he gave to the lay nun Toki in his earlier letter, “Bow and Arrow.” In the latter part (not covered in this article) he emphasizes the preciousness of even a single day of life: “Life is the most precious of all treasures. Even one extra day of life is worth more than ten million *ryo* of gold” (WND, 955), and finally, “If you live even one day longer, you can accumulate that much more benefit. How truly precious your life is” (WND, 955). Though it is not entirely clear, evidence suggests that the lay nun Toki lived until the year 1303, so she apparently took the Daishonin’s encouragement to heart, overcame her illness, and thus prolonged her life.

## Commentary

**There are two types of illness: minor and serious. Early treatment by a skilled physician can cure even serious illnesses, not to mention minor ones. Karma also may be divided into two categories: fixed and unfixable. Sincere repentance will eradicate even fixed karma, to say nothing of karma that is unfixable.**

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter to the lay nun Toki, who had been suffering from illness. In it, he encourages her that through the power and benefit derived from practicing the Lotus Sutra, she can change her karma to be sick and prolong her life as a result.

First, he points out that illnesses can be either serious or minor. We may view this as referring either to the symptoms or cause of an illness. Of course, serious causes of illness most often yield serious symptoms. On the other hand, as in the case of cancer, for instance — a serious cause of illness may for decades yield no serious symptoms at all.

In another letter, “On Curing Karmic Disease,” Nichiren Daishonin cites six causes of illness, quoting the Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai. They are: 1) disharmony of the four elements; 2) improper eating or drinking; 3) inappropriate practice of seated meditation; 4) attack by demons; 5) the work of devils; and 6) the effects of karma.

The first three causes may be thought of as describing such influences as changes in weather or climate, immoderate lifestyle, etc. These may lead to serious symptoms, depending on one’s resistance and basic physical strength. From the standpoint of cause, however, they are considered relatively light. The next two — attacks by demons and the working of devils — may be thought of as external influences of a more serious order, such as attacks by viruses or exposure to carcinogens. These, of course, may lead to very serious symptoms. Yet the Daishonin says that even these, if treated early on by a skilled physician, are not impossible to cure. Such diseases can be mitigated, and the patient’s life prolonged, by medical treatment.

Illnesses that arise as the effects of karma, however, he says “are the most difficult to cure” (WND, 632). This is because when an illness arises from karma, it cannot be cured until and unless that karma is transformed and eradicated.

*Karma* is a Sanskrit word meaning action. Specifically it refers to three kinds of action — action of thought, action of speech and action of body. These correspond to thought, word and deed. The general Buddhist theory of karma, or causality, teaches that good karma — i.e., good thoughts, words or deeds — remains in one’s life throughout the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. These causes produce effects that appear at some later time. From the standpoint of the Lotus Sutra and the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin, however, cause and effect do not occur over time but are simultaneous. The moment an action occurs, a cause is formed along with its potential effect. This latent cause–effect pair remain in one’s life until one encounters an appropriate “relation” or “external cause.” Then they appear as a “manifest effect,” or “karmic reward.” Of course, karma, causes and effects, and the eventual “reward” they engender can be either good or bad, desirable or undesirable. Good causes reap good rewards; bad actions lead to ill rewards.

As the Bible says, “Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Galatians 6:7). Certainly, most religions, including those based on the Judeo-Christian Bible, recognize the principle of causality in some general or basic sense. The Bible assigns the doling out of the ultimate “reward” of one’s actions, faith, or lack thereof to God. Buddhism, on the other hand, views this process as inherent to life itself. It is a natural outcome, much like the growth, ripening and fruition of a planted seed. Each action we make can be viewed as

a kind of “seed” in the soil of our eternal life. Depending on the type of seed and how it is planted, various fruits of various tastes, color and weight appear at different times. Some are heavy, some are light, some bitter, some sour, and some sweet.

Another way of looking at karma is as a life-habit or tendency. This is based on a simple principle—the more often an action is repeated, the easier and more second-nature it becomes. Eventually it becomes part of a person’s very make-up. Good actions practiced again and again become very good habits that yield ongoing good results. Bad actions repeated this way become bad habits that keep our lives on an unfortunate track. We can also view karma as the momentum and direction in which our life is moving.

A satellite traveling along a certain orbit can only change its course when great energy is applied, such as the thrust of a rocket. If our life is on a negative track, we need to drastically change our momentum and direction to move in a positive way. Simply doing a few good deeds—creating some good karma—is not enough to change the direction of a life weighted with heavy negative karma accumulated over countless lifetimes. The popular phrase “rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic” might describe the futility of anything short of a profound cause to transform our destiny for the better. What we need when facing our heavy negative karma is something powerful enough to change our momentum, to pump tons of seawater out of the “sinking ship” of our life. The energy to do this is Buddha-wisdom. It is endowed with life-force, hope, courage, compassion, intelligence and joy. It is present in limitless quantities in the ultimate depths of life itself—within our innate Buddha nature.

## **Two Kinds of Karma**

In “On Prolonging One’s Life Span,” the Daishonin mentions two kinds of karma—fixed and unfixed. Fixed karma refers to certain actions and causes that yield specific effects or effects that occur at a specific time in our lives. Unfixed karma refers to actions that might yield a variety of more minor effects, or effects that may not occur at a specific time. Two actions that appear very similar can produce karma that is either fixed or unfixed depending on a number of factors. These factors might include what the object of that action is, the strength of will or intent with which the action was performed, whether it was a single, isolated action or part of an series of repetitive actions.

We can see a parallel to the principle of fixed and unfixed karma exists in secular law. Where an offense is minor, it is unlikely to lead to imprisonment and may not even be prosecuted. Even if one were convicted, it would be up to the discretion of the judge what kind of punishment to impose. While there is no judge in the equation, unfixed karma operates in a similar manner. In the case of a serious crime, however, the judge is often bound by law to impose a fixed term of imprisonment. Once that sentence is imposed, it is very difficult to have it changed or commuted. Similarly, with fixed karma, the effect or result is fixed and very hard to change.

Buddhism views the length of one’s life as the primary example of fixed karma. Nevertheless, the Daishonin declares that even fixed karma can be changed through the power of the Lotus Sutra. Miao-lo6 states in his Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra that through the benefit of practicing the Lotus Sutra, “Even fixed karma can be changed.”

Conversely, the worst and heaviest kind of fixed karma arises from slandering or disparaging the Lotus Sutra, that is, life itself or those who uphold and practice it. The only way to overcome this kind of fixed karma is to go back to the source—the Mystic Law—to believe in that Law, uphold it and work to spread it. Because even this heaviest of fixed karma can be overcome and extinguished by believing in and practicing the Lotus Sutra,

then it is only natural that lighter fixed karma and unfixed karma can be transformed in this way also.

This writing describes various kinds of illness as being the results of fixed and unfixed karma. In general, karma that determines the length of one's life is regarded as fixed karma and that which does not affect the length of one's life is regarded as unfixed karma. In this letter, Nichiren Daishonin refers to karmic illness as any serious illness that a skilled physician has trouble curing and that may lead to an early death, and suggests that "sincere repentance" will cure such illness. It is not known how serious an illness Lord Toki's wife was suffering from, but the Daishonin encourages her that if even the most serious of illnesses can be cured through the Lotus Sutra, then less serious illnesses arising from "unfixed" karma can also be cured.

### **Buddhist repentance**

Regarding "repentance," the Meditation of the Bodhisattva Universal Worthy Sutra, which is regarded as an epilogue to the Lotus Sutra, reads, "If you wish to repent, then sit upright and ponder the true aspect [of all phenomena]." This may be interpreted to mean to sit upright in front of the Gohonzon, the manifestation of the "true aspect of all phenomena," and sincerely chant with a strong prayer.

Living in a largely Judeo-Christian society, the idea of repentance might remind us of a rather unpleasant history of subjugation to religious authority. In Christian tradition it generally means the acknowledgment and condemnation of one's own sins and an acceptance of or turning to God. The motivation of repentance or contrition comes from a love of God, whom human sin rejects or offends (*The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*). The Bible says, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Luke 5:21). By repenting, Christians believe God will forgive their sins. Historically, however, repentance often became an act of submission to the authority of the Church or its priests. Furthermore, repentance as understood in Western society does not provide a solution to either suffering or illness.

The term repentance in the passage we are studying from "On Prolonging Illness" is a translation of the Japanese term *zange*. Originally it meant to acknowledge one's misdeeds of the past and express regret for them before the Buddha, fellow practitioners and the people. In this age, however, repentance means to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to the Gohonzon. In doing so, the spirit of repentance also may include acknowledging that the cause for whatever suffering, illness or obstacle we may be facing is to be found somewhere in our own lives. It is also helpful to recognize that the solution to that problem also exists only within our own lives, in our determination, prayer and action. Because suffering ultimately stems from actions that oppose the Mystic Law—Nam-myoho-renge-kyo or the law of life—pledging deeply to support this Law and to fulfill our individual mission for the sake of Buddhism, and for peace and happiness, completes our spirit of repentance.

Rather than humble ourselves before the grace of an external deity or a clergyman, we humbly acknowledge that both the cause and the solution for suffering lie within our lives, and we take full responsibility for changing ourselves for the better. Our faith and practice give us the power to take responsibility for our happiness.

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**chrysanthemums blossoming in summer. In this age, it is as natural for a woman to change her fixed karma by practicing the Lotus Sutra as it is for rice to ripen in the fall or chrysanthemums to bloom in winter.**

This section begins with the Daishonin quoting a phrase from the “Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King” (23rd) chapter of the Lotus Sutra comparing the sutra to “good medicine” that can cure the ills of all people. He supports the validity of this statement by referring to the scene described in the sutra in which Shakyamuni Buddha, Many Treasures Buddha and all the Buddhas of the ten directions who are Shakyamuni’s emanations attest to the Lotus Sutra’s supremacy.

### **The Greatest of All Secrets**

Next, he speaks of a teaching contained in the sutra that he describes as “the greatest of all secrets.” That, he says, is the story of a woman who lives in the “last five-hundred-year period of the twenty-five hundred years following the Buddha’s passing” and suffers from an illness. In reality, no such story appears in the Lotus Sutra. Here, the Daishonin seems to be referring to the wife of Lord Toki herself. Both she and the Daishonin lived in what was held by all Japanese to be this “last five-hundred-year period.” That period marks the beginning of what is called the Latter Day of the Law. The Sutra teaches that in this evil age following the Buddha’s passing, the Lotus Sutra itself has the power to save from suffering those who are powerfully steeped in the “three poisons”—the illusions of desire—and even slanderers of the sutra and the Law it contains. It also teaches that women can attain enlightenment, which sutras prior to the Lotus either denied or never fully acknowledged. The fact that an ordinary woman such as the lay nun Toki could practice the essence of Buddhism, overcome illness, and attain enlightenment was surely a “secret” to most people of the Daishonin’s day.

Next, the Daishonin cites the examples of King Ajatashatru; Ch’en Chen, who was the brother of T’ien-t’ai; and Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, whose story appears in the Lotus Sutra. All three, he points out, transformed their fixed karma and thus prolonged their lives through their practice of the Lotus Sutra. King Ajatashatru had committed grave sins against Buddhism and the Buddha; Ch’en Chen, as a general, had been responsible for the deaths of a great many people; and the sutra explains that Bodhisattva Never Disparaging had committed some offense in the past. Though they were men who lived before the Latter Day of the Law, they were able to change their fixed karma. The Lotus Sutra, however, was taught specifically for the present, implies the Daishonin; and, alone among a multitude of sutras, it guarantees the enlightenment of women. Therefore, it is “as natural for a woman to change her fixed karma by practicing the Lotus Sutra” as it is for rice and chrysanthemums to ripen and bloom in their respective seasons.

### **Enhancing the Quality and Length of Our Lives**

Buddhism teaches that the four sufferings—birth, aging, sickness and death—are inherent to all life. Sickness, therefore, cannot be avoided forever. When we become ill, the important thing is how we will face it. The key to overcoming illness or suffering, karmic or otherwise, is the strong faith and conviction that, through the power of the Lotus Sutra—through the power of our prayer to the Gohonzon—we will summon forth the strong life force and wisdom necessary to change our karma into a cause for happiness.

Nichiren Daishonin, concluding his account of how King Ajatashatru overcame illness, says: “And the grave offenses that had burdened his heart vanished like dewdrops.” This is

similar to another statement by the Daishonin that appears in his “Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings,” which reads: “The offenses of living beings descend like dewdrops and frost upon their six senses as karmic hindrances. Yet the sun of wisdom can quickly eradicate them. The sun of wisdom in this Latter Day of the Law means Nam-myoho-rence-kyo, which Nichiren now spreads” (GZ, 786).

“The grave offenses that had burdened his heart” indicates the weight of Ajatashatru’s past slanders and actions to destroy Buddhism. The Daishonin compares them to “dewdrops,” which will vanish before the “sun of wisdom.” This “sun” represents a life imbued with the power of the pure life force, energy, hope and joy that well forth as a result of Buddhist faith and practice. These inner qualities function like a “sun” that makes all the burdens of our hearts “vanish like dewdrops” in its warm light.

Medical science is becoming all the more aware of the important role of human life-condition — of faith, confidence, joy, hope and determination — in overcoming illness. (For the Buddhist view on the inseparability of body and mind, please see “The Oneness of Body and Mind” in *Living Buddhism*, August 2000, pp. 6–7.) Research shows that hope and even humor can measurably improve the body’s resistance to disease. In this sense, we may view the underlying effect of fixed negative karma as a tendency to have weak life force — to be short on hope, to be humorless or joyless and to lack wisdom. Science is making it increasingly clear that possessing hope, vitality, and joy, as well as the ability to have fulfilling relationships and the self-discipline and common sense to live a balanced life, contributes to one’s health and longevity.

Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism is the Buddhism of the simultaneity of cause and effect. That means that the moment we chant Nam-myoho-rence-kyo with strong faith in our Buddhahood, we tap the power of our innate Buddha nature, the source of abundant wisdom and life force and all of the other qualities required for a healthy life. Further, when we pray and move our bodies for the sake of others’ health and happiness based on the Buddhist law of life, we exercise our lives on the deepest level at which body and mind are one. By doing so, we bring forth the power to help us stay healthy and fight disease, and enhance the quality and length of our lives.

*By the SGI-USA Study Department*

1. Lotus Sutra, chap. 23.
2. Ibid., chap. 2
3. Ch’en Chen (n.d.) was an elder brother of T’ien-t’ai and a general of the Ch’en dynasty.
4. Lotus Sutra, chap. 20
5. A female believer of Buddhism who has taken the tonsure as a nun has done, but continues to live as a lay member of society.
6. (711-782) Restorer of the T’ien-t’ai school.