# APRIL STUDY MATERIAL
# "LETTER TO NIIKE"
# (WND, P. 1027; GOSHO ZENSHU, P. 1440)

The following is an excerpt from "Letter to Niike." This is the study material for April study meetings in the SGI-USA.

**How swiftly the days pass! It makes us realize how few are the years we have left. Friends enjoy the cherry blossoms together on spring mornings, and then they are gone, carried away like the blossoms by the winds of impermanence, leaving nothing but their names. Although the blossoms have scattered, the cherry trees will bloom again with the coming of spring, but when will those people be reborn? The companions with whom we enjoyed composing poems praising the moon on autumn evenings have vanished with the moon behind the shifting clouds. Only their mute images remain in our hearts. Though the moon has set behind the western mountains, we will compose poetry under it again next autumn. But where are our companions who have passed away? Even when the approaching tiger of death1 roars, we do not hear and are not startled. How many more days are left to the sheep bound for slaughter?**

**Deep in the Snow Mountains lives a bird called the cold-suffering bird that, tortured by the numbing cold, cries that it will build a nest in the morning. Yet when day breaks, it sleeps away the hours in the warm light of the morning sun without building its nest. So it continues to cry vainly throughout its life. The same is true of human beings. When they fall into hell and gasp in its flames, they long to be reborn as humans and vow to put everything else aside and serve the three treasures in order to gain enlightenment in their next life. But even on the rare occasions when they happen to be reborn in human form, the winds of fame and profit blow violently, and the lamp of Buddhist practice is easily extinguished. Without a qualm they squander their wealth on meaningless trifles, but begrudge even the smallest contribution to the Buddha, the Law and the Buddhist Order. This is very serious, for then they are being hindered by messengers from hell. This is the meaning of "good by the inch and evil by the foot."2**

1. The "tiger of death" image is derived from a passage in The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom that states that, no matter how sweet the water or lush the grass, sheep will go hungry for fear of the ferocious tiger.
2. Here the Japanese word *ma*, or "devil" is being translated as "evil" for clarity of expression. In this case, it means what obstructs a greater good.

## BACKGROUND

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter in 1280 to Niike Saemon-no-jo, a samurai official in the Kamakura government of Japan. He was so named because he lived in a place called Niike in Iwata District of Totomi Province. Nikko Shonin had converted him and his wife to the Daishonin's teachings. Not much is known about Niike, but he was a dedicated believer who supported the Daishonin despite government opposition.

In this letter, the Daishonin explains from several perspectives the correct attitude and benefits of faith. He tells Niike of one's great fortune to have been born in the Latter Day of the Law with the mission to spread Buddhism. He also warns that it would be foolish to take faith in



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the Lotus Sutra and then commit slander.

The Daishonin laments for those who—although born at the time of the Mystic Law's propagation—refuse to take faith in it. Because human life is ephemeral, he stresses the importance of not wasting time on immediate pleasures. He uses the example of the cold-suffering bird to encourage his followers not to neglect their Buddhist practice.

## COMMENTARY

This is arguably one of the most beautiful and poetic passages that Nichiren Daishonin has written. He uses rich imagery and symbolism to discuss death and underscore the fact that we should "learn first about death and then about other things" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1404). Understanding death and its role in life is the key to leading a truly happy and fulfilled existence. When we are able to do this, we can see the value in a loved one's passing without being hindered by fear or despair. Naturally, we grieve over our loss, but we understand that death is itself a function of life and not an end unto itself. Death is a means to renew a continuing, eternal life.

**"Even when the approaching tiger of death roars, we do not hear and are not startled."**

Each day we live brings us one day closer to our deaths. Even though we know this intellectually, many of us do not recognize this reality and spend much of our time and energy chasing trivialities. We don't want to think of death because of our fear of the unknown. This fear causes some people to go to outrageous lengths to avoid death. We have heard stories of people who freeze their bodies with the hope that medical science can someday bring them back to life, or people who take pills or herbs that are "guaranteed to extend life." Further, we can become preoccupied with questions about where we go when we die or if our lives continue eternally. While these concerns are natural, they can impede us from addressing practical matters associated with death.

Even outside the spiritual realm, we don't like to deal with matters that surround our demise. Many people die without life insurance, a will or directions to surviving family members about how their affairs should be handled after their death. It is so much easier—not to mention more pleasant—to concentrate on the joys of living. The Daishonin says in "Letter to Niike," "Even when the approaching tiger of death roars, we do not hear and are not startled" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 1027).

In "Conversation between a Sage and an Unenlightened Man," the Daishonin also says, "Though everyone recognizes this [death] as a fact, not even one person in a thousand or ten thousand truly takes the matter seriously or grieves over it" (WND, 99). But he never advises us to think only of our deaths. Being preoccupied with death would make it difficult to be fully engaged in living. Rather, he encourages us to create maximum value in our lives now with an awareness of the reality of life and death. Since this existence does not continue infinitely, we must live in a way that expands our potential and leaves no room for regret at the moment of death. He urges us to "Be resolved to summon forth the great power of faith, and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with the prayer that your faith will be steadfast and correct at the moment of your death" ("The Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life," WND, 218).

SGI President Daisaku Ikeda suggests that we ponder this important subject. "What is death? What becomes of us after we die? Failing to pursue these questions is like spending our student years without considering what to do after graduating. Without coming to terms with death, we cannot establish a strong direction in life. Pursuing this issue brings real stability and depth to



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our lives" (*Faith into Action*, p. 22).

It is how we live that shapes how we experience the continuity of birth and death. When we are aware of the limit to our present life span, we will become more conscious of creating value. We will take decisive action to become happy and help others do the same. We will even look at our problems from a new perspective. When we understand that the state of life we develop, not fame or material wealth, determines what happens to us after death, we will see life on a grander scale. Life comes into a new focus, and we can redefine our priorities. With our Buddhist practice, we can discover a joy that transcends death. The Daishonin even says, "No one can escape death once born as a human being, so why do you not practice in preparation for the next life?" (WND, 1026).

In the same vein, President Ikeda says in the "Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra" series: "Having an awareness and understanding of death actually raises our life condition. For it is when we are cognizant of the reality and inevitability of death that we begin to earnestly seek 'something eternal,' and determine to make the most valuable use of each moment of life" (*Living Buddhism*, March 1999, p. 35).

**"Deep in the Snow Mountains lives a bird called the cold-suffering bird that, tortured by the numbing cold, cries that it will build a nest in the morning. Yet when day breaks, it sleeps away the hours in the warm light of the morning sun without building its nest. So it continues to cry vainly throughout its life. The same is true of human beings."**

The Daishonin uses the example of an imaginary animal — the cold-suffering bird — to illustrate how foolish people can be when it comes to facing the impermanence of life. The cold-suffering bird lives in the Himalayas, and once the temperature goes down at night, it is tormented by the cold. It promises to build a nest when the morning comes, but forgets the pledge when it gets a chance to rest in the sun.

It is easy to see the foolishness of the cold-suffering bird, whose life is based on the immediate reality of pain or pleasure. Actually, birds are not so foolish and instinctively build nests. It is human beings who behave like the imaginary cold-suffering bird. It is our own shallow wisdom that limits our sense of reality to only what we perceive in the here and now.

In the allegory of the cold-suffering bird cited by Nichiren Daishonin, a "day" represents life and "night" represents death (dormant life). The main point is, what does it mean to build a nest? For us, it means to expand our life-condition, to strengthen our Buddha nature. This is our "nest." It is all that we will take with us — it is our peaceful and secure place in the universe after we die. That is why it is crucial to attain genuine happiness in this life and not be swayed by the transitory "warm light of the morning sun"— the "winds of fame and profit."

The "winds of fame and profit" are the shallow or false values we are confronted with in today's society. Society is based on a view that our happiness lies almost everywhere except in our Buddhist practice — in our looks, our prestige or fame, our material possessions and so on. These things have their place as long as we understand that true happiness is built from within through undergoing a human revolution through our Buddhist practice. It is the process of overcoming the barriers to happiness existing within us — changing the karma that is unique to each of us.

Like the cold-suffering bird, we bask in the sun of temporary security until the next crisis. We are swayed by the misperception that immediate pleasures equal happiness. Pursuit of these things can make us neglect our Buddhist practice and render us unaware of our approaching deaths. While caught up with life's gains and losses, we live in the moment with little thought to



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the continuing cycle of birth and death.

**"When they fall into hell and gasp in its flames, they long to be reborn as humans and vow to put everything else aside and serve the three treasures in order to gain enlightenment in their next life. But even on the rare occasions when they happen to be reborn in human form, the winds of fame and profit blow violently, and the lamp of Buddhist practice is easily extinguished. Without a qualm they squander their wealth on meaningless trifles, but begrudge even the smallest contribution to the Buddha, the Law and the Buddhist Order."**

The three treasures are what we revere as Buddhists and what all people should revere. They are the Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo that enables us to attain enlightenment; the Buddha, Nichiren Daishonin, whose teachings reveal the Law to us; and the Buddhist Order or community, the SGI, that protects and propagates the Law. By revering the three treasures in our practice of Buddhism, we create good fortune in this lifetime and the next.

We make offerings to the Buddha by offering our prayers to the Gohonzon and respecting and developing our Buddha nature and encouraging others to do the same. We support the Law by spreading the teaching of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. And we can support the Buddhist Order through our network of human relationships and by supporting those practicing Buddhism. We are fortunate to be members of the SGI. Without the community of believers, the Law revealed by the Buddha would be lost.

Through the practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, we can strengthen the core of our lives—the life-condition of Buddhahood. When we live with our mission to fulfill kosen-rufu firmly rooted in our hearts, we will most certainly win over the shortcomings that prevent us from becoming happy, now and in the future.

President Ikeda reminds us that we all have the potential to be absolutely happy—a happiness that is not shattered by death—when he states: "We can attain a happy life state that shines like a diamond, solemn and indestructible under all circumstances. And we can do so in this lifetime. The Lotus Sutra exists to enable all people to attain such a state" (*Learning from the Gosho: The Eternal Teachings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 42). With courage and confidence, we can build a life that is a testament to the immeasurable power of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

## THE THREE TREASURES: THE TRANSLATION OF SANGHA, BUDDHIST ORDER, INTO CHINESE AND JAPANESE BY SHIN YATOMI, SGI-USA VICE STUDY DEPARTMENT LEADER

On the morning of October 6, 1536, an Englishman was strangled and burned at the stake in Belgium after sixteen months of imprisonment. William Tyndale was charged with translating the Bible from the original Hebrew and Greek texts into English—against the will of the Roman Catholic authorities. After his death, his name was largely forgotten, but his translation survived the relentless book burnings instigated by the bishop of London and eventually became the basis of the King James version to reach millions of English-speaking readers until today. Tyndale's enemies, including Sir Thomas More, vehemently attacked his new and daring translations of some key biblical terms. Tyndale translated, for example, the Greek words *ekklesia* as "congregation" instead of "church" and *presbyter* as "elder" instead of "priest," and he was correct.1 Scrolls and dictionaries—these were not the only things the translators of sacred texts



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had to deal with in the past; they also had to listen to (or choose to ignore) the voices of those dressed in holy robes. As we see in Tyndale's tragic death, the translation of sacred texts has been often a source of controversy involving religious authority, and Buddhism is no exception in this regard.

As many Buddhist texts in Pali and Sanskrit were translated into Chinese in the early centuries of the Common Era, the original meanings of some words were obscured in the process — sometimes deliberately to suit the translating monks' or their superiors' personal motives and circumstances. One such mistranslated word is *sangha* (also spelled *samgha*), which meant the Buddhist Order in the context of Buddhist scriptures. During Shakyamuni's time, the same term described a number of political groups and trade guilds; it was also applied to religious groups.2 The general notion of the *sangha* included the four groups of Buddhists: monks (*bhiksu*), nuns (*bhiksuni*), laymen (*upasaka*) and laywomen (*upasika*).3 When it is used in early Buddhist texts, however, the term usually refers to the two types of religious orders: the order of monks (*bhiksu-sangha*) and the order of nuns (*bhiksuni-sangha*). The Buddhist Order was often called *samagra-sangha* or "harmonious order." It was thought that members of the *sangha* should practice in harmony since they share the same goal of attaining enlightenment.4

*Sangha* was translated into Chinese as *seng-chia*. (To be precise, this was a transliteration of the word *sangha*.) *Seng*, the Chinese abbreviation of *seng-chia*, eventually came to mean an individual monk instead of the community of the Buddha's disciples. In India, an individual monk was referred to as *bhikkhu* or *bhiksu*. In Buddhist texts, the usage of the term *sangha* was strictly distinguished from that of *bhikkhu* or *bhiksu*. The *sangha* was considered one of the three treasures of Buddhism along with the Buddha and the Dharma (i.e., the Buddhist Law or teaching), but an individual monk was never considered an object of veneration as an element of the three treasures.

I-Ching (635–713), a Chinese Buddhist scholar, after visiting many Buddhist sites in India, pointed out to Chinese Buddhists this misapplication of the term *sangha* to individuals.5 Many scholars acknowledged the error, but they insisted on continuing to use the term to refer to an individual priest or monk. This misuse of the term was accepted by the Japanese when Buddhism took root in Japan, as well. The Japanese term *so*, the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese *seng* of *seng-chia*, came to signify an individual priest. As a result, this mistranslation significantly altered the concept of the three treasures in China and Japan. Particularly in Japan, the term was misused to promote reverence toward an individual priest. It is this misinterpretation that Nichiren Shoshu has been leaning on to dogmatically define its high priest as being part of the three treasures.6 As discussed earlier, the treasure of the *sangha* originally referred to the Buddhist Order, which, in the broadest sense, included all Buddhists, both monks and lay believers. The *sangha* was revered especially after Shakyamuni's death precisely because the Buddhist community as a whole fulfilled the important role of preserving and spreading the Buddha's teaching.

In light of those historical facts, I feel the components of the three treasures would best be expressed as the Buddha, the Dharma and the *sangha* in order to emphasize the original meaning and intent of the concept. The "Law" or the "Teaching" for the Dharma, and the "Order" or "Community" for the *sangha* may be used if English terms are preferred. In terms of etymology and common usage, the word "order" is more associated with ecclesiastical or monastic hierarchy; the word "organization," which we often use to describe the SGI, was originally related to the vital functions of a living body but now sounds bit inorganic and cold; the word community, however, still retains a sense of the Lain word *communitas* or fellowship, which is akin to the spirit of *samagra-sangha* or "harmonious order." But translating the treasure of the



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*sangha* as "the treasure of the priesthood" would be, I feel, a diminution of the original term, and "the Treasure of the Priest"7 an outright distortion. I am pleased that in the recently published *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, the treasure of *sangha* is translated as the treasure of the "Buddhist Order," not "Priest" as in the previous editions of *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*.

I welcome this translation of *sangha*. There is no doubt that the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood's excommunication of the SGI in 1991 ultimately afforded such freedom for the translators and editors to make such improvements. The priesthood probably meant the excommunication to "exclude" the SGI from "communion" with the high priest, but it ironically put the SGI closer to the true teaching of Buddhism. The SGI is certainly not the first to adopt "the Buddhist Order" as an English translation of *sangha*; in one sense, however, it took us thirteen centuries to correct the mistranslation of *sangha* noticed by I-Ching. Some may feel reluctant to change the accustomed usage of the word even if it is wrong, but it is never too late to correct a past mistake. The effort is worthwhile especially when we think of the nameless, faithful translators who long ago risked their lives to spread Buddhism, as Tyndale did for Christianity.

(This essay is partly based on the author's previous essay "Do We Need Priests?: A Historical Perspective on the Early Buddhist Order" published in *Living Buddhism*, October 1999, pp. 5–15.)

1. David Daniell. "Introduction." *Tyndale's New Testament*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989. p. xxix.
2. Akira Hirakawa. *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Sakyamuni to Early Mahayana.* Translated and edited by Paul Groner. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998. p. 62.
3. Ibid., p. 62.
4. Ibid., p. 60.
5. Hajime Nakamura. *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India, China, Tibet and Japan*. Edited by Philip P. Wiener. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1964. p. 259.
6. Nichiren Shoshu promotes the absolute obedience to the high priest, using the concept of the three treasures. For example, "The Treasure of the Priest (s) was first received by Nikko Shonin through the Bestowal of the Living Essence of the Law by the Daishonin, and after that, the Pure Law was passed down to each successive High Priest in the lineage of the Heritage, spanning the generations up until the present day. . . . In short, with perfectly sincere faith and self-imposed, strict obedience, we should hold the High Priest's instruction in deepest reverence . . ." Quoted from *Dai-Nichiren (Special Edition): On the Soka Gakkai Problem—The Correct Way of Faith in Nichiren Shoshu*, published by the Nichiren Shoshu Bureau of Religious Affairs, pp. 13–14.
7. In Nichiren Shoshu, the treasure of the *sangha* is translated as "the Treasure of the Priest." See, for example, *Dai-Nichiren (Special Edition): On the Soka Gakkai Problem—The Correct Way of Faith in Nichiren Shoshu*, published by the Nichiren Shoshu Bureau of Religious Affairs, pp. 10-16.



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