

**JUNE STUDY MATERIAL**  
**“LETTER TO JAKUNICHI-BO”**  
**(WND, PP. 993–94, GOSHO ZENSHU, P. 902)**

The following is an excerpt from “Letter to Jakunichi-bo,” the study material for June study meetings in the SGI-USA.

The sutra reads, “As the light of the sun and moon can banish all obscurity and gloom, so this person as he advances through the world can wipe out the darkness of living beings.”<sup>1</sup> Consider carefully what this passage signifies. “This person as he advances through the world” means that the first five hundred years of the Latter Day of the Law will witness the advent of Bodhisattva Superior Practices, who will illuminate the darkness of ignorance and earthly desires with the light of the five characters of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. In accordance with this passage, Nichiren, as this bodhisattva’s envoy, has urged the people of Japan to accept and uphold the Lotus Sutra. His unremitting efforts never slacken, even here on this mountain.

The sutra then goes on to say, “After I have passed into extinction, [one] should accept and uphold this sutra. Such a person assuredly and without doubt will attain the Buddha way.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, those who become Nichiren’s disciples and lay believers should realize the profound karmic relationship they share with him and spread the Lotus Sutra as he does. Being known as a votary of the Lotus Sutra is a bitter, yet unavoidable, destiny.

Fan K’uai,<sup>3</sup> Chang Liang,<sup>4</sup> Masakado,<sup>5</sup> and Sumitomo<sup>6</sup> never acted cowardly because they cared so deeply about their honor and abhorred disgrace. But disgrace in this life is nothing. Of far greater concern is the disgrace that appears in the next life. Proceed to the place of practice of the Lotus Sutra, bearing in mind the time when you must face the wardens of hell, and the garment-snatching demoness and the garment-suspending demon will strip off your clothes on the bank of the river of three crossings. The Lotus Sutra is the robe that will keep you from disgrace after this life. The sutra reads, “It is like a robe to one who is naked.”

Believe in the Gohonzon with all your heart, for it is the robe to protect you in the world after death. No wife would ever leave her husband unclothed, nor could any parents fail to feel pity for their child shivering in the cold. Shakyamuni Buddha and the Lotus Sutra are like one’s wife and parents. You have helped me and thereby saved me from disgrace in this life; in return, I will protect you from disgrace in the next. What one has done for another yesterday will be done for oneself today. Blossoms turn into fruit, and brides become mothers-in-law. Chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, and be always diligent in your faith.

I cannot thank you enough for your frequent letters. Jakunichi-bo, please convey all these teachings in detail to that believer.

*Nichiren*  
*The sixteenth day of the ninth month*

## BACKGROUND

This letter was written to a young disciple named Jakunichi-bo Nikke, the son of the lord of Okitsu, Kazusa Province. There is a contemporary of this recipient also named Jakunichi-bo Nikke, but it is a different person, using different Chinese characters that are read the same

phonetically. This letter is dated the sixteenth day of the ninth month, with no year indicated, though it is believed to be 1279. Early in the Bun'ei era (1264–75), Jakunichi-bo and his family had become followers of the Daishonin, who was then propagating his teachings in their area. Jakunichi-bo became a priest and later, after the Daishonin's death, he founded Tanjo-ji temple in Kominato to commemorate the place of the Daishonin's birth. Jakunichi-bo remained faithful to Nikko Shonin, the Daishonin's immediate successor, and was never swayed by the erroneous interpretations of the wayward five senior priests who betrayed Nichiren Daishonin and opposed Nikko Shonin. It is also thought that this letter was intended for a female believer who lived in Kazusa Province and was referred to in the closing sentence of this excerpt as "that believer."

The passage at the end reads, "I cannot thank you enough for your frequent letters." Jakunichi-bo exerted himself in propagation activities in the area where Nichiren Daishonin was born and must have reported and made offerings to him regularly. It is most likely that Jakunichi-bo had a Gohonzon from the Daishonin, who inscribed many at that time for believers of strong faith.

Earlier in this letter, the Daishonin discloses the meaning of his name, Nichiren, implying that it signifies the Buddha who will bring enlightenment to all people in the Latter Day of the Law. (This letter is also known by the title "My Own Enlightenment Regarding the Buddha Vehicle.") He declares that his disciples must also exert themselves to convey the supreme teaching of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to all humankind. Then the Daishonin explains that the demons who, according to legend, strip one of one's garments at the time of death symbolize death's stripping away all pretensions and superficial attainments, whether wealth, power or knowledge. In conclusion, the Daishonin encourages Jakunichi-bo, pledging to protect him in the next life since the latter protected the Daishonin in this life. Thus the Daishonin suggests the profound and timeless nature of the teacher-disciple relationship.

## COMMENTARY

In an earlier portion this letter, Nichiren Daishonin states that it is extremely rare to be born as a human being. Appreciation to have been born in human form is the foundation of Buddhist humanism. There are several million plant and animal species on the earth today. In view of the myriad forms of existences, human beings are a most wondrous occurrence. Beyond that, to encounter the Buddha with the correct teaching is rarer still. Buddhism describes human beings as "the correct vessel for the sacred path."

Figuratively speaking, the Daishonin states that we must have "offered alms to a hundred thousand million Buddhas" in our past existences to have been born human and encounter Nam-myoho-renge-kyo in this lifetime. When the going is difficult and we tend to begrudge our lives, it is important to remember that we have exerted great effort and accumulated tremendous good fortune to be in our present circumstances. We are living at the time of worldwide propagation of the Law. We should not just take this as good fortune, but as a sign of our mission to accomplish kosen-rufu.

**In accordance with this passage, Nichiren, as this bodhisattva's envoy, has urged the people of Japan to accept and uphold the Lotus Sutra. His unremitting efforts never slacken, even here on this mountain.**

The Daishonin modestly refers to himself as "this bodhisattva's envoy," but revealing the Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and propagating it in the Latter Day of the Law is itself the mission of

Bodhisattva Superior Practices, the leader of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth as revealed in the Lotus Sutra. These are the actions of one who “will illuminate the darkness of ignorance and earthly desires” with the light of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

In the fifteenth chapter of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni preaches to numerous bodhisattvas who pledge to propagate the Lotus Sutra after his death. But in a dramatic turn of events, he tells them:

“Leave off good men! There is no need for you to protect this sutra. Why? Because in this saha world of mine there are bodhisattvas and mahasattvas who are as numerous as the sands of sixty thousand Ganges.... After I have entered into extinction, these persons will be able to protect, read, recite and widely preach this sutra” (LS15, 212–13).

At that moment, the earth trembles and uncountable, radiant bodhisattvas emerge from the earth looking unlike anything the assembly had ever seen. “Among these bodhisattvas were four leaders. The first was called Superior Practices. . . .” (LS15, 214). These multitudes, led by Superior Practices, carry the mission to propagate the Law in the defiled future age, the Latter Day of the Law. The figure of Bodhisattva Superior Practices is Nichiren Daishonin and the Bodhisattvas of the Earth are his followers who accomplish kosen-rufu, the members of the SGI.

In the part of “Letter to Jakunichi-bo” just before the excerpt on page seven, the Daishonin states, “My giving myself the name Nichiren (Sun Lotus) derives from my own enlightenment regarding the Buddha vehicle.” This identifies him as the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law, who attained enlightenment by himself. He also states that from among the multitude of bodhisattvas who pledged to propagate the Lotus Sutra, withstanding all the persecutions foretold in the sutra (LS13, 193–95), only he had fulfilled that pledge.

The significance of taking the name Nichiren is that while the lotus blooms in a muddy swamp, the lotus flower remains pure. Nichiren Daishonin, as the original Buddha, lived in this world filled with earthly desires and suffering, and yet was not swayed by them. His life was like a beacon, a sun, lighting the path to enlightenment for others.

**Therefore, those who become Nichiren’s disciples and lay believers should realize the profound karmic relationship they share with him and spread the Lotus Sutra as he does. Being known as a votary of the Lotus Sutra is a bitter, yet unavoidable, destiny.**

As practitioners of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism we are Bodhisattvas of the Earth who bear the mission to propagate the Law. This is not a matter of chance, but a result of causes made in the past. It is our “profound karmic relationship” that we share with him to spread Nam-myoho-renge-kyo as he did. In “The True Aspect of All Phenomena,” he states, “If you are of the same mind as Nichiren, you must be a Bodhisattva of the Earth” (WND, 385). Today, whose actions and accomplishments prove they “are of the same mind as Nichiren?” It is, without doubt, the members of the SGI who are striving to accomplish kosen-rufu. Devoting our lives to the same noble cause as Nichiren Daishonin is the meaning of the mentor–disciple relationship.

In “Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra,” SGI President Ikeda explains the meaning of bodhisattva: “Though we speak of them as bodhisattvas, they are in fact Buddhas.

“Bodhisattva is not a stage of completion (the effect of Buddhahood), but of incompleteness (the cause of Buddhahood). Bodhisattvas, while incomplete, cause their lives to overflow with the state of completion (the effect of Buddhahood)” (*Living Buddhism*, October 1997, p. 47).

From the viewpoint of the mentor–disciple relationship, a bodhisattva (cause) is the disciple and the Buddha (effect) is the mentor. The fact that cause and effect are, in essence, simultaneous provides the basis for the view of the oneness or equality of mentor and disciple. This clarifies

the misunderstanding that the mentor or Buddha is superior to others. This gives us an accurate understanding of the distinction between Nichiren Daishonin and ourselves. He is not different or better than us in the sense that his life is qualitatively superior to ours. His greatness lies in his ability to manifest his enlightenment on his own.

Our “bitter yet unavoidable destiny” as votaries of the Lotus Sutra should not be viewed as a fatalistic statement. Through our Buddhist practice we can absolutely change our destiny for the better. People tend to believe that happiness is the absence of problems. But this view leads us to define happiness as some kind of heavenly or paradisiacal concept. Buddhism does not teach freedom from problems, but freedom from the suffering that accompanies problems. We overcome suffering and feel joy in the midst of our struggles. It gives us the inner resources, the power and wisdom to be victorious over any difficulties.

We are responsible to change our karma. It is an unavoidable responsibility that requires patience, self-discipline and strong faith. The Daishonin wants us to realize that Buddhism is not some kind of escape from the realities of living. It is a philosophy of how to live most meaningfully and happily to the fullest of our potential.

The Daishonin chose to fulfill his mission in spite of the persecutions and difficulties it entailed. His full understanding of the alternatives made his choice “unavoidable.” To observers, it may have seemed “bitter” but he was not bitter at all about his destiny. In the midst of his most severe circumstances while in exile on Sado Island he writes in “The True Aspect of All Phenomena”:

“I cannot hold back my tears when I think of the great persecution confronting me now, or when I think of the joy of attaining Buddhahood in the future. Birds and crickets cry, but never shed tears. I, Nichiren, do not cry, but my tears flow ceaselessly. I shed my tears not for worldly affairs but solely for the sake of the Lotus Sutra” (WND, 386).

We also are votaries of the Lotus Sutra and although we face many difficulties, we should view them as proof of our mission and a source of nourishment and energy to strengthen our faith. In “Earthly Desires Are Enlightenment,” the Daishonin expresses his own attitude: “I do not regret meeting with such great persecutions as the votary of the Lotus Sutra. However many times I were to repeat the cycle of birth and death, no life could be as fortunate as this” (WND, 317).

**Fan K’uai, Chang Liang, Masakado, and Sumitomo never acted cowardly because they cared so deeply about their honor and abhorred disgrace. But disgrace in this life is nothing. Of far greater concern is the disgrace that appears in the next life. Proceed to the place of practice of the Lotus Sutra, bearing in mind the time when you must face the wardens of hell, and the garment-snatching demoness and the garment-suspending demon will strip off your clothes on the bank of the river of three crossings.**

“The river of three crossings” is a mythical river that one is said to cross after his or her death. How one crosses depends on the amount of good and evil karma accumulated in life. Those with mostly good karma cross by a bridge adorned with seven kinds of precious jewels. Those with an even karmic balance of good and evil cross at a ford. Those with a negative balance must swim through water infested with terrible serpents.

On the far bank, male and female demons wait under a large tree. The female demon strips the dead of their clothes and the male demon hangs them on a tree. The severity of one’s offenses is determined by how much the branch bends under the weight of the clothes.

The river of three crossings is not an orthodox Buddhist concept and its specific origin is unknown. It appeared in India around the tenth century and entered into Japanese folklore in the

eleventh. The idea of such a river or rivers that the dead must cross exists also in Greek and Zoroastrian traditions.

In this particular story, the clothes taken by the demons represent worldly attachments. As the saying goes, “You can’t take it with you.” In a world that emphasizes fame, success and material goods, the Daishonin is turning our focus to matters of eternal importance. Just what can we take with us when we die? What should we value most in this life? It is not what other people think of us in this life. To be admired for the trappings of wealth and social standing will not serve us at all after death.

He cites the names of people whose behavior was dictated by their fear of being disgraced in the eyes of others. “Of far greater concern is the disgrace that appears in the next life,” he says. At the moment of death, our faith — our life-condition — will be the only determining factor in how we experience death and rebirth. Once we are stripped of the garments of pretense and superficial attainments, what will clothe and protect us? Nichiren Daishonin assures us, “The Lotus Sutra is the robe that will keep you from disgrace after this life. The sutra reads, ‘It is like a robe to one who is naked.’”

If we attain Buddhahood in this life, it is a matter of course that we will continue in Buddhahood after death. In the letter “Hell is the Land of Tranquil Light,” the Daishonin writes to a widow, “When he was alive, he was a Buddha in life, and now he is a Buddha in death. He is a Buddha in both life and death” (WND, 456). In “Letter to Jakunicho-bo,” he writes, “Believe in the Gohonzon with all your heart, for it is the robe to protect you in the world after death.”

Using familiar examples, he shows us how natural it is that we will be comforted and protected by our faith in the Gohonzon. “You have helped me and thereby saved me from disgrace in this life; in return, I will protect you from disgrace in the next” again emphasizes that the mentor-disciple relationship transcends a single lifetime—it is a profound karmic relationship. He ends with the admonition to not be lax in our faith.

*By SGI-USA Study Department*

1. Lotus Sutra, chapter 21.
2. Ibid.
3. Fan K’uai (d. 189 B.C.E.) A military leader and strategist who assisted Emperor Kao-tsu in unifying China and establishing the Former Han dynasty. Fan K’uai is known for his courage and loyalty.
4. Chang Liang (d. 168 B.C.E.) A statesman and strategist who assisted Liu Pang, or Emperor Kao-tsu, in the overthrow of the Ch’in and the establishment of the Former Han dynasty of China.
5. Masakado (d. 940) Taira no Masakado, a distinguished warrior of the Taira clan who exercised great power in eastern Japan. He attacked government offices in Kanto and adopted the title of “New Emperor.” Soon thereafter, however, his forces were routed, and he was killed by his cousin, Taira no Sadamori, with the support of Fujiwara no Hidesato.
6. Sumitomo (d. 941) Fujiwara no Sumitomo, a military commander of the Fujiwara clan who subdued a gang of pirates in 936. However, he later became a pirate chief himself and rebelled against the government. He was finally defeated and killed in 941.

## **NICHIREN DAISHONIN'S IDENTITY AS THE "SUPREME VOTARY OF THE LOTUS SUTRA"**

In "Letter to Jakunichi-bo," Nichiren Daishonin identifies himself as "the supreme votary of the Lotus Sutra" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 993). A votary is a person who has made a vow to fulfill a religious practice—in this case, to propagate and practice the Lotus Sutra. Identifying himself in this way was important because it directly led to how he lived his life. Our self-image influences our action. Depending on his relationships within society, the Daishonin, as we all do, assumed different identities—a man, a subject of the shogunate government, a priest, a teacher, a son and so on. Throughout his writings, however, he sees himself primarily as a votary of the Lotus Sutra.

If we examine the Daishonin's image of a votary of the Lotus Sutra, it can provide a guide on how to practice the Daishonin's Buddhism, as well as how we view ourselves.

The Daishonin views a votary of the Lotus Sutra as someone who fulfills the Buddha's prophesy, that is, the widespread propagation of the Lotus Sutra. In the form of a pledge by Shakyamuni's disciples, the Lotus Sutra foretells the spread of its teachings: "After the Buddha has passed into extinction, / in an age of fear and evil / we will preach far and wide" (LS13, 193). In the sutra, Shakyamuni also instructs the bodhisattva Constellation King Flower: "After I have passed into extinction, in the last five hundred year period you must spread it abroad widely throughout Jambudvipa [the world] and never allow it to be cut off" (LS 23, 288).

The Daishonin rhetorically asks in "The Opening of the Eyes II," "Who, then, in this present age will be the votary of the Lotus Sutra and fulfill the prophecy of the Buddha?" (WND, 278). The foremost qualification of a votary of the sutra is his or her devotion to the spread the Law contained in the Lotus Sutra—*Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*. The Daishonin revealed what has existed eternally so his identity as a votary of the sutra transcends the Lotus Sutra taught at a specific time and place by Shakyamuni Buddha. His unique mission was to make the Law contained in the sutra available to all people.

The Daishonin sees a votary of the Lotus Sutra as someone who actualizes the sutra's ideals of the sanctity, equality and freedom of all lives. Furthermore, the Daishonin explains that votaries of the sutra undergo various difficulties on account of their efforts to spread the sutra's teachings. He states, "If there exists a votary of the Lotus Sutra, then the three types of enemies are bound to exist as well" (WND, 278). Here "the three types of enemies" refer to verbal and physical abuses from lay people ignorant of the sutra, attacks by arrogant priests and finally government persecutions incited by religious authorities (LS13, 193–95).

The Daishonin explains that since the votaries of the sutra uphold and spread the sutra's ideals, which are alien to many and threatening to those in power, they are bound to experience those difficulties. He describes his reaction when he hears of imminent persecutions in "The Actions of the Votary of the Lotus Sutra," "Hearing this, I rejoiced, saying that I had long expected it to come to this" (WND, 764). Because he saw himself as a votary of the Lotus Sutra, his difficulties—even a failed execution attempt and exile to a remote island—became a source of joy and pride. The Daishonin's self-awareness and action as a votary of the Lotus Sutra enabled him to attain Buddhahood.

The Daishonin's life is also an example for his disciples to follow. The Daishonin in fact teaches that those who share his desire for the sutra's widespread propagation and act in the same way he does are also votaries of the Lotus Sutra. He explains: "Now, no matter what, strive in faith and be known as a votary of the Lotus Sutra, and remain my disciple for the rest of your life. If you are of the same mind as Nichiren, you must be a Bodhisattva of the Earth" (WND,

385). Here the Daishonin views faith as one's confidence in his or her identity as a votary of the Lotus Sutra. He also equates a votary of the Lotus Sutra with a Bodhisattva of the Earth.

It is interesting to note that the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth that appear in the Lotus Sutra are symbolic of Buddhist practice. They are Bodhisattvas Superior Practices, Boundless Practices, Pure Practices and Firmly Established Practices. A votary, in other words, is a person of practice, of action. According to the Daishonin, those four bodhisattvas also respectively represent the four virtues of a Buddha: true self, eternity, purity and happiness. Put another way, a votary of the Lotus Sutra is a Buddha in action.

Although the Daishonin often emphasizes the fearless practice of a votary of the Lotus Sutra in the midst of difficulties, we must not overlook his or her warm humanistic side, as the Daishonin demonstrates in "Letter to the Lay Nun of Ko." In this letter, the Daishonin writes to an elderly woman who would probably never see her dear teacher again: "If you find that you miss me, always look at the sun that rises [in the morning] and the moon that rises in the evening. Whatever the time, I will be reflected in the sun and the moon. And in our next life, let us meet in the pure land of Eagle Peak" (WND, 596). The Daishonin teaches us that neither distance nor time presents an obstacle in the realm of faith. He reassures us that the bond between mentor and disciple in Buddhism transcends time and space. Through the care and concern he extends to his disciples, the Daishonin demonstrates that being a votary of the Lotus Sutra is to be someone who appreciates human relationships, someone who understands the hearts of others. Compassion is the spiritual foundation for a votary of the Lotus Sutra.

We fulfill many roles in our lives — husband, wife, student, employee, friend, etc. — including practitioner of Buddhism. But which self-image is our fundamental identity? Which will lead us to Buddhahood? Since how we view ourselves affects how we behave, our self-image can determine the quality of our lives. The Daishonin's life, based on his confident self-awareness as a votary of the Lotus Sutra, guides us in our search for our own fundamental identity.

*By SGI-USA Study Department*