

LIVING THE TEACHINGS (6)
ARROGANCE IS THE BEGINNING OF THE END
BY FRED ZAITSU, PUBLISHER

“Now, if you wish to attain Buddhahood, you have only to lower the banner of your arrogance, cast aside the staff of your anger, and devote yourself exclusively to the one vehicle of the Lotus Sutra. Worldly fame and profit are mere baubles of your present existence, and arrogance and prejudice are ties that will fetter you in the next one. Ah, you should be ashamed of them! And you should fear them, too!”

“Questions and Answers about Embracing the Lotus Sutra”
(The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, pp. 58–59)

When I was a reporter working for the Soka Gakkai newspaper *Seikyo Shimbun* in Tokyo during the 1960s, I had a boss who made me want to quit. As a young man new to the job, I knew I had plenty to learn. During my years working on the paper, I had many instances where my work was corrected. As was the custom at that time, we received strict training in order to develop our potential. For our own sake, our shortcomings were not treated lightly. Most of the time, my superiors were trying to help me learn and improve—I could sense where they were coming from. But this one managing editor was different.

When I made a mistake he would yell at me sometimes for up to an hour. He would scream and curse and degrade me horribly. He told me I was stupid and to go to hell. I was so discouraged one time, I almost wanted to die.

That night, I went out with some co-workers for a couple of beers. I told them I couldn't take it anymore. I was so upset I wanted to punch him in the face and walk out. But my friends encouraged me to not be defeated.

Later, I realized that this boss's behavior was an expression of his arrogance. He was bolstering his feeling of superiority by belittling me. In the Buddhist concept of the Ten Worlds, arrogance is a function of the world of Anger (Jpn *asura*), although it is not always expressed through the emotion of anger. *Asura* actually represents a state of belligerence or war-like behavior. An arrogant person looks down on others in an attempt to prop up his or her self-esteem. It is a harmful attitude, especially to those who express it. Eventually, this boss left his job and turned against the Soka Gakkai.

SGI President Ikeda constantly warns leaders not to think they are better than others. His message is that leaders should serve the members.

In describing the forces that oppose propagation of the Law, the Lotus Sutra elucidates “three powerful enemies.” All three are labeled as arrogant: arrogant lay people, arrogant monks and arrogant high-ranking priests. People who behave arrogantly are antithetical to the teachings of Buddhism.

Sensing that his death was near in the autumn of 1282, Nichiren Daishonin made final preparations to perpetuate the Buddhism he founded: he designated Nikko Shonin as his successor in September 1282. The following month, he named six senior disciples, including Nikko Shonin, and entrusted them with the propagation of his teachings. Early on October 13, he appointed Nikko Shonin as chief priest of Kuon-ji temple at Mount Minobu and urged all believers to follow him. Nichiren Daishonin died later that day.

At first, Nikko Shonin was accepted as the chief priest of the temple at Minobu. But soon, all five of his fellow senior priests turned against him, betrayed the Daishonin and propounded

their own teachings. What force could be so powerful as to turn all five from the correct path? I think in the end, it was arrogance. Arrogant people cannot grasp the mentor–disciple relationship because they cannot accept the equality of themselves and others. They view the mentor as superior and are inclined to tear him or her down, or they view themselves as superior. Therefore, they are not receptive to the mentor’s message. This is a challenge we all face — overcoming the arrogance of our lesser ego. The question is, “How do we overcome our arrogance?”

A few years after I was appointed SGI-USA general director, I was in Japan at a dinner with President Ikeda. I asked him, “How can I help the SGI-USA to grow?” I thought he might dismiss such a simple question from the general director. But he didn’t. He looked at me very seriously for a moment and said: “Pray for the members’ happiness. For more than forty years I have prayed deeply every single day for the health, prosperity, safety and happiness of each member. This is the foundation of the SGI.”

My first thought was, “I already pray for the members’ happiness.” My own arrogance made me feel a little defensive at first. But I chanted and thought about it. I realized that President Ikeda was talking about the depth of prayer. It seems simple, but I came to understand this point more profoundly — that if the members are happy, if they show proof of their Buddhist practice in their lives, then our organization will naturally become more warm and humanistic and people will want to join us.

Praying for the happiness of others is what the SGI is all about. This is a lifelong challenge to overcome our self-centered arrogance and develop compassion. In *Faith into Action*, President Ikeda says: “The moment we forget to have a humble seeking mind and instead come to see ourselves as intrinsically great, our ruin begins. This is as true of leaders in the organization as it is of people with social status” (p. 162).

At the same time, we have to stand strong against those who would mislead our fellow members. To have compassion for members and to take action for justice are two sides of the same coin. Sometimes humility or absolute self-confidence may be appropriate depending on the circumstances. But arrogance is not the way of a Buddha. In “Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra,” President Ikeda says: “A Buddha is one who has awakened to the truth that all people are potentially Buddhas. A Buddha’s enlightenment is none other than this. There is therefore no such thing as a Buddha who is arrogant or who looks down on others. Such behavior would indicate that one is not the genuine article” (*Living Buddhism*, October 2000, p. 30).

In “Letter to the Sage Nichimyo,” the Daishonin writes:

“Bodhisattva Never Disparaging was for many years cursed and humiliated [because] he venerated them by uttering the twenty-four characters that read: ‘I have profound reverence for you, I would never dare treat you with disparagement or arrogance. Why? Because you are all practicing the bodhisattva way and are certain to attain Buddhahood’” (WND, 322).

It is always easier to see the arrogance in others than it is to see it in ourselves. So it must be our lifelong challenge to overcome our innate arrogance, the nature of the devil king of the sixth heaven, within our own lives.