

BUDDHIST CONCEPT FOR TODAY'S LIVING (29) THE DEVIL MADE ME DO IT! DEVILS AND DEMONS IN THE LOTUS SUTRA

We have all heard the expression, “The devil made me do it.” We might have even used it whenever our hand was caught in the proverbial cookie jar. The desire to pin our “devilish” actions on someone or something else is so pervasive, we probably don’t think anything of it when we do it. When we, as practitioners of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, talk about devils and demons, what do we mean?

First, we have to toss all preconceived notions of devils and demons out of our heads. Forget the protruding horns, crimson skin and iron staff. Let’s not visualize fire-breathing monsters with warts that hide under the bed or in the closet. In Buddhism, devils and demons are not so obvious.

Nichiren Daishonin stated: “[Demons]... deprive people of their lives, for a demon is also known as a robber of life. [Devils]... deprive people of benefits; another name for a devil is a robber of benefit” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 87). He further indicates that there are two types of demons, good and evil. “Good demons feed upon enemies of the Lotus Sutra, while evil demons feed upon the sutra’s votaries” (WND, 912).

In Buddhist scriptures, there are many types of creatures. There are *yakshas* that eat people; *rakshasas*, malignant demons that feed on human flesh; and *kumbhandas* that feed on human spirit or vitality. Further, there are hungry demons — those that were greedy in a previous existence and are born hungry in the next. It should be noted that while *yakshas* eat the flesh of evildoers, they do not eat the flesh of good people.

Some evil demons transformed themselves into good demons after taking faith in Buddhism. The “Dharani” chapter of the Lotus Sutra tells of Kishimojin (Jpn) and her ten demon daughters. This demon stole and ate other people’s children. Upon witnessing this, Shakyamuni hid her youngest child from her. Kishimojin was naturally upset about her child’s disappearance. Shakyamuni admonished her by pointing out that the grief she feels is the same that other parents experience when she devours their children. Kishimojin has a change of heart and pledges—along with her ten daughters—to protect the votaries of the Lotus Sutra.

These descriptions of devils in the Lotus Sutra, such as Kishimojin, are used to show how our evil actions affect others and to show how practicing Buddhism changes our lives and the environment.

The Benevolent Kings Sutra states: “When a nation becomes disordered, it is the spirits that first show signs of rampancy. Because the spirits become rampant, all the people of the nation become disordered” (WND, 8). When we speak of rampant demons, we might bring up a mental image of monsters destroying things. In Buddhism, demons represent functions of human nature and the environment that bring misery and suffering. These demons and devils — the robbers of life and benefit — are actually the negativity inherent in our lives. They can appear as negative internal feelings and as external influences that try to obstruct our Buddhist practice.

Even in the lives of wonderful bodhisattvas, there is fundamental darkness. Negativity — like death and taxes — is certain to be a part of our lives until our final moments. Subtle negativity, like self-doubt, may be difficult to see as a devilish function, but it most certainly is. It keeps us from recognizing that we are Buddhas, worthy of the highest respect. But if we chant Nam-myoho-rence-kyo and study Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism on a regular basis, we can strengthen our Buddha nature, thereby overshadowing our devilish nature.

It is important to remember that this fundamental darkness is something that is always within us and we must be ever-vigilant to defeat it. There are things that appear in the external realm like social ills and moral and ethical injustices. But if we do not see that we possess the same tendencies to be unjust, in whatever form, we can become critical of others and feel powerless to do anything to change society or ourselves.

SGI President Ikeda stated in his “Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra”: “On the level of the individual, practicing the Lotus Sutra means confronting the fundamental darkness in one’s own life. In terms of society, it means confronting corrupt power and authority. Practicing the Lotus Sutra, therefore, necessarily entails challenging great difficulties. Someone who does not confront great hardship is not a true votary of the Lotus Sutra” (*Living Buddhism*, August 1997, pp. 42–43).

Nichiren Daishonin states: “Good and evil have been inherent in life since time without beginning. [They] remain in one’s life through all the stages of the bodhisattva practice up to the stage of near-perfect enlightenment” (WND, 1113 [see page 10]).

In our time, any function that attempts to destroy faith in Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism can be seen as a demon — or as the Lotus Sutra describes, “evil demons taking possession of others.”

*In a muddied kalpa, in an evil age
There will be many things to fear.
Evil demons will take possession of others
And through them curse, revile and
heap shame on us.
But we, reverently trusting the Buddha,
Will put on the armor of perseverance.
(LS13, 194)*

Nichiren Daishonin pointed out the mistakes and misunderstandings of the religious teachings and institutions of his time and declared Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to be the truth that will lead people to happiness. The Daishonin struggled against persecution by religious and secular authority and taught the genuine way of Buddhist practice. We have the same challenge today, to fight against religious authorities that seek to delude and confuse people. These people can be described as functioning as demons.

Let’s keep in mind that all demons and devils can serve as a stimulus or motivation toward good if we confront them with faith. When devilish functions arise and we see them for what they are, we can challenge them and change our circumstances for the better. They are good in the sense that we can use them to develop and strengthen our lives. If we fall prey to their negative influence, we will lose in the end. Nichiren Daishonin considered all those who tried to act as his enemies to be his friends in that they allowed him to prove the correctness of his teachings. We can learn from his model.

To summarize, let’s fight against evil demons — those internal and external — and increase the function of good demons so that we can further humanism, peace and culture in society.

By Alexis Trass, based on *Yasashii Kyogaku* (Easy Buddhist Study) published by *Seikyo Press* in 1994.