

THE KALPA OF DECREASE — A TIME TO OVERCOME GREED, ANGER AND FOOLISHNESS

The title, “The Kalpa of Decrease,” is taken from its opening passage: “The kalpa of decrease has its origin in the human heart. As the poisons of greed, anger, and foolishness gradually intensify, the life span of human beings gradually decreases and their stature diminishes” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 1120). *Kalpa*, a Sanskrit word, is an extremely long period of time. Sutras and treatises differ in their definitions, but kalpas fall into two major categories, those of measurable and immeasurable duration. There are three kinds of measurable kalpas: small, medium and major. One explanation sets the length of a small kalpa at approximately sixteen million years. According to Buddhist cosmology, a world repeatedly undergoes four stages: formation, continuance, decline and disintegration. Each of these four stages lasts for twenty small kalpas and is equal to one medium kalpa. Finally, one complete cycle forms a major kalpa.

The *kalpa of formation* is the period of time in which a world takes shape and living beings appear. The *kalpa of continuance* is the second stage. In this kalpa a world and its inhabitants continue to exist. In this period the life span of human beings is said to repeat a cycle of change, decreasing by a factor of one year every hundred years until it reaches ten years, and then increasing at the same rate until it reaches 80,000 years. It then decreases again until it reaches ten years, and so on. A period when the human life span is lengthening is called a *kalpa of increase*, while a period when it is diminishing is called a *kalpa of decrease*. The *kalpa of decline* is the period of time during which a world decays. And the *kalpa of disintegration* is the last of the four-stage cycle in which a world disintegrates.

Greed, Anger and Foolishness Diminish People’s Life Span

The explanation of life span in such Buddhist cosmology may not be taken literally in terms of years. Rather, it may be understood in terms of life-condition, that is, the diminished life span as the enfeebled and confused state of life and the prolonged life span as the empowered and sound state of life. As the Daishonin points out, “The kalpa of decrease has its origin in the human mind,” meaning that the enfeebled state of life is caused by life’s own delusions. Grasping the concept of “the kalpa of decrease” from the perspective of the inner workings of human life, the Daishonin explains that in a kalpa of decrease, people’s lives are so consumed by the three poisons of greed, anger and foolishness that their life span diminishes. In Nagarjuna’s *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, the three poisons are regarded as the cause of all illusions and earthly desires. The three poisons are so called because they pollute people’s lives and cloud their self-knowledge, that is, their understanding of their Buddhahood. When deluded by the three poisons, therefore, people lose respect for human life and act inhumanely.

When he says, “As the poisons of greed, anger, and foolishness gradually intensify, the life span of human beings gradually decreases and their stature diminishes,” the Daishonin explains that when we are consumed with greed, anger and foolishness, our ability to live long is lessened and our physical appearance is affected. We may interpret this to mean that our delusions diminish the life force and wisdom necessary to live long, healthy lives. People’s diminished stature in a kalpa of decrease may be also taken to indicate not only people’s weak physical conditions, but also their inner powerlessness — how small they feel about their own

existences. If people's diminished life span is caused by their delusions, as the Daishonin suggests, the secret to living long and productive lives must be found in our efforts to cleanse our minds of the three poisons of greed, anger and foolishness.

The Three Calamities of Warfare, Pestilence and Famine

The Daishonin explains that on a societal level, the three poisons are the underlying causes of the calamities of warfare, pestilence and famine, which are said to occur at the end of each kalpa of decrease. The calamity of famine is also called the calamity of high grain prices or inflation; this term may be also interpreted generally as an economic recession. During the Daishonin's time, people suffered from violent conflicts, the Mongol invasions, pestilence, famine and repeated natural disasters such as earthquakes, drought and flood.

Seeing many people suffering before his eyes, the Daishonin could not help wondering why people had to suffer and started to seek the causes of human misery. In this regard, the Daishonin states: "In the kalpa of decrease, the three minor calamities will occur, namely, famine, pestilence, and warfare. Famine occurs as a result of greed, pestilence as a result of foolishness, and warfare as a result of anger" (WND, 989). The Daishonin identifies the three poisons of greed, anger and foolishness as the prevalent characteristics of the people living in a kalpa of decrease and as the cause of their major sufferings.

The Three Poisons of Greed, Anger and Foolishness

The poison of greed is a tendency to be controlled by desires, instead of using them as a means to attain happiness. People in this condition suffer because they never feel satisfied. Yet they desperately try to possess and consume more to satisfy their own desires, never wanting to share with others. No matter how much they possess, they cannot even enjoy their possessions because they are never enough and there's more to be acquired. At the core of greed lies the insecure self that seeks to validate its meaning with the possession of external objects.

The poison of anger is a condition in which people are compelled to control their circumstances yet unable to do so, resulting in deep frustration and hatred for themselves and others. Their inability to control their environment frustrates them and wounds their pride; they are always angry at whatever does not go their way. People who are controlled by the poison of anger cannot exercise wisdom to create value, that is, joy and happiness; instead, they act to bring more suffering and unhappiness upon themselves and others. At the core of anger lies people's deep-seated powerlessness, which they try to compensate for with their control over the externals, rather than enriching and empowering their inner lives. Often their desire to control the external objects takes an extreme form — destruction. Angry people feel compelled to destroy others or things of value to others in order to compensate for their inner powerlessness. When they are prevented from destruction, their destructive tendency often points to themselves.

The poison of foolishness is a lack of wisdom to use reason and create genuine happiness. The poison of foolishness particularly clouds people's understanding of the law of cause and effect at work within their lives. People in this condition are at a loss as to the cause of their suffering; therefore, they always complain and lament their circumstances while blaming others for their own misery. Because of their inability to perceive the cause of their problems or the solution, they are pessimistic about their lives and make more negative causes, further intensifying their suffering. The poison of foolishness is the inability of self-reflection.

T'ien-t'ai also explains greed, anger and foolishness as a part of the five delusive passions. According to his interpretation, people steeped in the poison of greed favor whoever agrees

with their own views; and people touched by the poison of anger resent whoever disagrees with their own views; and people confused by the poison of foolishness cannot understand that their views are false and actually the cause of their suffering.

The Three Poisons and the Current Global Problems

As we closely examine each of the three poisons and the current situations in the world, we can understand how people's greed, anger and foolishness are leading to the three calamities of warfare, famine and pestilence. War breaks out when people, controlled by the poison of anger, forget that compassionate dialogue, rather than violence, is the ultimately effective means to solve conflicts and create peace. Freedom and equality decline, and authoritarianism and dictatorship increase when people favor only those who hold the same view and hate those whose opinions differ from theirs.

Broadly interpreting famine as a shortage of various resources needed to sustain and enrich our lives, we can understand that this condition is caused more often by people's greed than by uncontrollable factors in nature. Many people, in both developing and developed nations, are suffering from an inequitable availability of food, energy, medical care, social welfare and education. Often driven by greed, some people selfishly seek material wealth and actually create "famine" for many others.

Pestilence may be considered a malfunction of a living organism caused by mental or physical disharmony, and many disharmonies of the body and mind are often caused by our own foolishness. Furthermore, the global destruction of the environment, in one sense, can be regarded as a "sickness" of the Earth. In this sense, it may be said that the global destruction of the environment is caused by our foolishness in creating disharmony with the environment — our lack of wisdom to understand the symbiotic relationship between ourselves and the environment.

Self-control for Greed, Compassion for Anger, Wisdom for Foolishness

While the Daishonin identifies greed, anger and foolishness as the causes of famine, warfare and pestilence respectively, he attributes the most fundamental cause of these calamities to ignorance of the fundamental law of life, that is, the law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. To understand the law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is to see one's own Buddhahood and awaken to the absolute dignity of every person. The Daishonin teaches that we can achieve this realization through our sincere faith and prayer to the Gohonzon.

The Daishonin, therefore, refutes any Buddhist teaching that attempts to cure the three poisons on a superficial level without dealing with the people's fundamental ignorance of their innate Buddhahood, or Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. In "The Kalpa of Decrease," the Daishonin says: "Thus, the extremity of greed, anger, and foolishness in people's hearts in the impure world of the latter age makes it difficult for any worthy or sage to control. This is because, though the Buddha cured greed with the medicine of the meditation on the vileness of the body, healed anger with the meditation on compassion for all, and treated foolishness with the meditation on the twelve-linked chain of causation, teaching these doctrines now makes people worse and compounds their greed, anger, and foolishness" (WND, 1121).

The three kinds of meditation the Daishonin mentions above are the methods of what the Daishonin calls "the provisional teachings" to cure people of the three poisons. Greedy people see the impurity of their attachment, thus learning self-control; angry people see the importance of compassion; and foolish people gain the wisdom to perceive the causal law of

life. These methods are also illustrated by one of the “four ways of teaching” (Jpn *shishitsudan*). The Daishonin, however, points out that those methods would be ineffective or even harmful if practiced without understanding the fundamental law of life.

The human mind is complex. The delusions that cause us suffering are similarly complex. While some illusions are relatively simple, others are deeply rooted in our lives. The greater the illusions we suffer from, the more profound the teaching that is required. As the Daishonin explains in “The Kalpa of Decrease:” during a kalpa of decrease, the negative functions of human life intensify, overwhelming its positive functions. If we wish to control our profound illusions, we need the teaching that reveals life’s innermost strength.

Simply meditating on self-control, compassion and wisdom may not be effective without tapping into our innate power to manifest those qualities in reality. When we awaken to our own Buddhahood through prayer to the Gohonzon, however, our conscious efforts now become effective. As the Daishonin states, “One who is thoroughly awakened to the nature of good and evil from their roots to their branches and leaves is called a Buddha” (WND, 1121). Thus, our awakening to “the root of good” within us allows us to control “the root of evil” within us. We might sometimes think, “Because I practice Buddhism, I don’t necessarily have to worry about my behavior,” assuming that our actions automatically befit those of a Buddhist without much conscious effort. However, the qualities of self-control, compassion and wisdom only have impact when they are actualized in daily life through the strengthening of our Buddha nature.

By the SGI-USA Study Department

1. The five delusive passions are greed, anger, foolishness, arrogance and doubt; they are the illusions of the threefold world. The five delusive passions are explained in Vasubandhu’s *The Dharma Analysis Treasury*. Dharmapala, one of the ten great scholars of the Consciousness-Only school, includes the five delusive passions along with the five false views in a list of ten fundamental earthly desires, and T’ien-t’ai includes them in the illusions of thought and desire, which constitute the first of the three categories of illusion.