

**BACK TO THE BASICS  
THE FOUR DEBTS OF GRATITUDE  
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Second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda once said it is better to remember what others have done for you rather than what you have done for others. And SGI President Ikeda has pointed out that people who have an ungrateful, complaining nature “are not respected by others. From both Buddhist and secular perspectives, their behavior does not befit a wise or worthy person” (*Faith into Action*, p. 11).

As a matter of etiquette, no one would argue the virtues of expressing gratitude; most people would agree it is an ideal way to behave. Moreover, gratitude in terms of Buddhist practice is that essential element that makes the difference between a practice that becomes stagnant and one that remains a true expression of deep faith. In other words, victory in life boils down to one critical factor—can you maintain appreciation and confidence in your life, no matter what is going on? This dynamic of faith and practice becomes even more apparent when you consider Nichiren Daishonin’s writing “The Four Debts of Gratitude.”

The Daishonin tells us here that “One who studies the teachings of Buddhism must not fail to repay the four debts of gratitude” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 43). The four debts of gratitude are as follows: 1) the debt owed to all living beings; 2) the debt owed to one’s mother and father; 3) the debt owed to one’s sovereign; and 4) the debt owed to the three treasures (the Buddha, the Law and the Buddhist Order).

In this writing, the Daishonin observes, “It is the way of ordinary people that, even though they spur themselves on to arouse the aspiration for enlightenment and wish for happiness in the next life, they exert themselves no more than one or two out of all the hours of the day, and this only after reminding themselves to do so” (WND, 43). This human predicament is why these four debts are so important. They are not just a “common courtesy” that we owe—each one represents a relationship to our environment that serves as the measuring stick of our Buddhist practice and, ultimately, our Buddhahood.

Logically speaking, it is easy to see the benefit of these four debts when considering their absence: No other living beings would mean no people to care about, interact with, share Buddhism with—even to engage in healthy competition. No parents would mean no birth, which in turn would mean no opportunity to encounter Buddhism or to attain enlightenment. No system of government, economics or society would equal no context in which to measure your growth or to establish yourself.

Finally comes the debt we owe to the three treasures, and the Daishonin specifically emphasizes the treasure of the Buddhist Order: “Without the members of the Order who studied [Buddhism] and passed it on, it would never have been transmitted throughout the two thousand years of the Former and Middle Days into the Latter Day of the Law” (WND, 45).

Although Nam-myoho-renge-kyo exists, and therefore the path to enlightenment exists, it is the people, the votaries of the Lotus Sutra, who spread the teachings and make enlightenment for all living beings possible. In other words, without a body of believers to practice and pass on this teaching, it would remain merely theory.

With all the marvels that humankind possesses, it is gratitude that proves to be the driving force of faith.