

April
Study of Nichiren Daishonin's writings
"On the Treasure Tower"

The following excerpt from The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin is material for the SGI-USA study meetings in April.

IN the Latter Day of the Law, there is no Treasure Tower other than the figures of the men and women who embrace the Lotus Sutra. It follows, therefore, that those who chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, irrespective of social status, are themselves the Treasure Tower and likewise they themselves are Taho Buddha. There is no Treasure Tower other than Myoho-enge-kyo. The daimoku of the Lotus Sutra is the Treasure Tower, that is to say, the Treasure Tower is Nam-myoho-enge-kyo.

(The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, vol. 1. p. 30)

(Gosho Zenshu, [The Collected Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, in Japanese], p. 1304)

Background: Elderly Couple Protects Nichiren

DURING his exile to Sado, an island known for its bitter winter cold in the northern Sea of Japan, Nichiren wrote this letter, dated March 13, 1272, to his aged disciple Abutsu-bo. One account suggests that Abutsu-bo was a samurai warrior guarding the imperial palace in Kyoto when he escorted an exiled retired emperor to Sado. Another version of his life suggests he was a native of Sado.

Abutsu-bo had been a staunch believer of the Pure Land sect, which promised its followers that they could go to the Pure Land of Amida Buddha in the afterlife by reciting this Buddha's name. (In fact, Abutsu in the name of the letter's recipient is an abbreviation for Amida Buddha, suggesting his previous devotion to the Pure Land teaching.)

Upon hearing of Nichiren's arrival to the island, Abutsu-bo visited his hut to confront him in debate since it was rumored that this exiled priest was an enemy of the Pure Land sect. Struck by Nichiren's compassion and character, however, Abutsu-bo along with his wife Sennichi-ama took faith in Nichiren's teaching. From that moment until Nichiren's pardon and return to Kamakura over two years later, the couple provided for him in the face of oppression from local officials and Pure Land sect zealots. Later Nichiren wrote to Sennichi-ama:

Whatever Heaven's design in the matter may have been, every single steward and Nembutsu believer worthy of the name kept strict watch on my hut day and night, determined to prevent anyone from communicating with me. Never in any lifetime will I forget how under those circumstances you, with Abutsu-bo, carrying a wooden container of food on his back, again and again came in the night to bring me aid. It was as though my deceased mother had suddenly been reborn in the province of Sado! (MW-6, 255)

Long after Nichiren was pardoned and moved to Mount Minobu, the couple remained his staunch disciples. Despite his advanced age, Abu tsu-bo visited his beloved teacher at Minobu three times before he died. This letter is Nichiren's response to Abutsu-bo's inquiry regarding the meaning of Taho Buddha and the

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Treasure Tower depicted in “The Emergence of the Treasure Tower,” the eleventh chapter of the Lotus Sutra. Nichiren explains that the Treasure Tower in the Lotus Sutra signifies the Buddha nature within the lives of all people. When people take faith in the Lotus Sutra and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the magnificent Treasure Tower of their Buddha nature emerges within their lives. After the death of Abutsu-bo, Nichiren wrote to his widow, Sennichi-ama: “Some may wonder where the spirit of the late Abutsu-bo may be at this moment. But by using the bright mirror of the Lotus Sutra [the Gohonzon] to reflect his image, I, Nichiren, can see him among the assembly on Eagle Peak, seated within the Treasure Tower of Taho Buddha...” (MW-6, 297).

Commentary: “On the Treasure Tower”

IN the beginning of “On the Treasure Tower,” Nichiren writes to Abutsu-bo: “In your letter you ask: ‘What is signified by the Treasure Tower, where Taho Buddha was seated, appearing from within the earth?’ The appearance of this bejeweled stupa [in the eleventh chapter of the Lotus Sutra] is of great importance...” (MW-1, 29). In his response to Abutsu-bo’s question, he explains the meaning of the Treasure Tower.

In the Lotus Sutra, the appearance of the Treasure Tower is described as follows: “At that time in the Buddha’s presence there was a tower adorned with the seven treasures, five hundred yojanas in height and two hundred and fifty yojanas in width and depth, that rose up out of the earth and stood suspended in the air” (LS11, 170). A yojana is a unit of measurement from ancient India, equal to the distance the royal army was thought to march in a day. Approximations vary, but, according to one account, the height of the Treasure Tower corresponds to the radius of Earth.

Seated within this giant tower suspended in the air are Shakyamuni and Taho Buddha. From the moment of its emergence in the eleventh chapter through the twenty-second or “Entrustment” chapter of the sutra these two Buddhas conduct the so-called Ceremony in the Air. The meaning of the Treasure Tower has been interpreted from various perspectives but after briefly introducing T’ien-t’ai’s explanation of the Treasure Tower, Nichiren offers a succinct conclusion: “In the Latter Day of the Law, there is no Treasure Tower other than the figures of the men and women who embrace the Lotus Sutra.”

THE Lotus Sutra” in this passage indicates Nam-myoho-renge-kyo or the fundamental law of life and the universe (the Mystic Law). He states that the Treasure Tower is the lives of people who embrace the Gohonzon and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Put another way, the enormous Treasure Tower studded with the seven kinds of jewels symbolizes the magnificence and nobility of Buddhahood, which emerges within the lives of those who embrace the Mystic Law.

If we take the depiction of the Treasure Tower literally, it sounds like the product of an overactive imagination. Of course, it is not meant to be taken as a record of historical fact. But it is not merely a fantastic tale either. As Nichiren explains in this letter, the story of the Treasure Tower is set in the Lotus Sutra in order to illustrate the magnificent potential of Buddhahood latent within the lives of all people. The Lotus Sutra depicts the Treasure Tower on a cosmic scale, like a cluster of all treasures in the universe, signifying the vastness of the cosmos.

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TAHO Buddha is said to appear whenever the Lotus Sutra is preached, representing eternity. With those symbolic meanings in mind, Nichiren tells Abutsu-bo that he himself is the Treasure Tower and that he himself is Taho Buddha, urging him to realize the true nature of his life. He is telling Abutsu-bo and the practitioners of today: "Your lives are eternal, as vast as the universe itself; they are as precious as all the treasures therein." The Treasure Tower and Taho Buddha seated within it are metaphors for the dignity and eternity of human life respectively.

As Nichiren states "the figures of the men and women who embrace the Lotus Sutra" and "chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, irrespective of social status," all people, transcending differences of gender, status and wealth, have the potential to attain Buddhahood.

Many people may understand the dignity of human life intellectually but in reality they may be disrespecting themselves and others. The concept of the Treasure Tower encourages us to break through our lack of self-worth and realize our inherent dignity. Society is now so complex and institutionalized that many people experience a sense of powerlessness and despair. "How can I make any change in the world when I am just one insignificant human being?"

We live in a world where a person's value is often judged in terms of money and social status. In such a materialistic world, people have difficulty realizing the treasure of their own lives. If people fail to see the value of their own lives, then how can they treat others with respect? This is why Nichiren urges his followers to manifest the Treasure Tower within their lives so that they may experience the value of their lives as a concrete reality. He teaches that through the invocation of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo people can come to realize the existence of Buddhahood in all humanity.

JUST thinking, "I am worthy," will not change much. To believe in our true self-worth, we need a mirror to reflect the Treasure Tower hidden in the depths of our lives. The Gohonzon is the mirror to reflect life's ultimate truth. As we continue to practice, chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with faith in our inner Treasure Tower, our lives begin to manifest it. In this letter, Nichiren emphasizes, "There is no Treasure Tower other than Myoho-renge-kyo." He teaches us not to seek the Treasure Tower outside our lives since our lives themselves are the entity of the Mystic Law and thus the Treasure Tower itself.

Nichiren's teaching does not point to some superior force outside of our lives that we should depend on. It is a teaching that develops self-reliance; it encourages a process in which we reform our daily lives to think, and act in accordance with the ultimate truth of our lives as reflected in the Gohonzon. It leads us to believe "My life is the Treasure Tower, and so are the lives of all people." □

Additional Commentary

The following are excerpts from "Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra" in this issue.

OUR lives are dignified Treasure Towers. Yet it is a truth that eludes us. To realize that such a truth is indeed our lives is, in fact, "seeing the Treasure Tower." The ceremony that takes place in the "Treasure Tower" chapter is a mirror that reveals the true entity of our lives. The Gohonzon that Nichiren Daishonin established, based on the ceremony in the "Treasure Tower" chapter, is the "clear mirror" in which we can

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perceive our true selves. Buddhism is close at hand; it is concerned with the reality of our lives (pp. 21–22).

WHEN we chant the Mystic Law and practice for our own happiness as well as that of others, our lives become the Treasure Tower. Put another way, the Treasure Tower emerges in our lives. The Law that we chant is Myoho-renge-kyo. And Myoho-renge-kyo is also the entity of our lives (p. 28).

NICHIREN Daishonin says, “The Treasure Tower is none other than all living beings, and all living beings are none other than the complete entity of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo” (GZ, 797). This is the perspective of “The Emergence of the Treasure Tower” chapter. We perceive the Treasure Tower in our own lives, and we perceive the Treasure Tower in the lives of others. And we are working to sanctify the places where we live and the entire world with forests of Treasure Towers. Let us construct “Treasure Towers of kosen-rufu” in our communities. Let us each leave behind an eternal golden monument of personal achievement. Let us adorn our lives by challenging ourselves with the spirit, “This is where I will build my Treasure Tower” (p. 36).

ON the level of life there are no differences of gender, skin color or ethnicity. There is no discrimination on the basis of wealth or social status. Everyone is equal. Basing oneself on the Treasure Tower, therefore, could be thought of as establishing a view of the sanctity of life of absolute equality. It is true humanism.... Those who discriminate against others violate the sanctity of their own lives. On the other hand, when we treasure the lives of others, the Treasure Tower within us shines (p. 36). □

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