

Sept and Oct
Study of Nichiren Daishonin's writings
This Person Will Practice Among the People

The following letter from The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin is material for the SGI-USA study meetings in September and October.

AFTER I had not heard from you for some time, your letter arrived. In addition, I have received the quilted robe with a blue lining, a hat, a sash, one *kan*¹ of coins and a basket of chestnuts.

The present time corresponds to the first five hundred years of the Latter Day of the Law.² The text of the sutra clearly states that at this time, Bodhisattva Jogyo³ will make his advent and bestow the five characters of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo⁴ upon all the people of Japan. It also makes clear that he will face exile and execution. I, Nichiren, am like the emissary of Bodhisattva Jogyo, because I am spreading this doctrine.

The "Supernatural Powers of the Thus Come One" [21st] chapter [of the Lotus Sutra] states: "Just as the light of the sun and moon illuminates all obscurity, this person will practice among the people and dispel the darkness of all beings." In this passage, in the statement, "this person will practice among the people," to whom do you think "this person" refers? I believe that it must indicate the person who is the reincarnation of Bodhisattva Jogyo. The sutra states, "After I have passed into extinction, [a person of wisdom] should accept and uphold this sutra. Such a person assuredly and without doubt will attain the Buddha way."⁵

You, too, are surely assisting Bodhisattva Jogyo's efforts of propagation.

Nichiren

The third day of the twelfth month in the second year of Koan (1279), cyclical sign *tsuchinoto-u*⁶

(The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, vol. 6, pp. 285–86)
(Gosho Zenshu, [The Collected Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, in Japanese], p. 1102)

Background: Father's Opposition Strengthens Brothers' Faith

NICHIREN Daishonin wrote this letter in 1279 at age 58 while living at Mount Minobu, about three years before his death. The title, "This Person Practices Among the People," is based on a quote from the Lotus Sutra. The recipient was Ikegami Munenaka, who took faith around 1256, three years after the establishment of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. His younger brother, Munenaga, took faith soon after.

The brothers' father, Ikegami Saemon-no-tayu Yasumitsu, was the director of the Office of Construction and Repair of the Kamakura shogunate government. An earnest supporter of the priest Ryokan of Gokuraku-ji temple, the father conspired

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with government officials to instigate numerous persecutions of the Daishonin and his followers. He strongly opposed his sons' Buddhist practice for more than twenty years.

When the elder brother, Munenaka, refused to renounce his faith, he was disowned by his father—once in 1275 and again in 1277. Behind the father's actions were the machinations of Ryokan. The Daishonin writes to the brothers: "Ryokan and other priests, inspired by devils, deceived your father Saemon-no-tayu and attempted to destroy the two of you..." (MW-6, 239). In thirteenth-century Japan, if one were disowned, he suffered devastating economic and social consequences, losing not only all rights to the family estate, but essentially becoming a non-person, with virtually no social or civil rights.

The first time Munenaka was disowned, the Daishonin sent "Letter to the Brothers," encouraging both brothers to persist in their faith through mutual support. Around 1276, Munenaka was forgiven, only to be disowned again a year later. Although he faced this courageously, the younger Munenaga wavered for a while. With his elder brother disowned, Munenaga stood to inherit the family's estate as well as the father's prominent government position. The situation worried the Daishonin and prompted him to write frequently to Munenaga.

Supported by the Daishonin's continuous encouragement, the Ikegami brothers and their wives grew stronger in faith during these hardships. As a result, their father not only pardoned the elder brother, but took faith in the Daishonin's teaching in 1278, shortly before his death.

By the time he received this letter in 1279, Munenaka had experienced many difficulties while remaining a staunch disciple of the Daishonin. He also witnessed the persecution of his mentor time and again by the alliance of the political and religious powers. Munenaka must have seen profound significance in this letter in which the Daishonin mentions "exile and persecution," and quotes the Lotus Sutra: "This person will practice among the people." And no doubt the Daishonin's praise, "You, too, are surely assisting Bodhisattva Jogyo's efforts of propagation," gave Munenaka a great sense of joy and pride as a disciple.

Commentary

THIS letter, although relatively short, explains a fundamental principle of Buddhism—that the basic characteristic of any Buddha is to practice among the people, struggling alongside them to share their sufferings and joys and to enable them to become happy.

In this letter, Nichiren Daishonin states that he is "like the emissary Bodhisattva Jogyo." Citing the sutra passage, "this person will practice among the people," he also states that "this person" refers to the "reincarnation of Bodhisattva Jogyo."

In the "Emerging from the Earth" chapter (15th) of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni's

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disciples and various Buddhas and bodhisattvas from throughout the universe pledge at the Ceremony in the Air to spread the sutra after Shakyamuni Buddha's passing. But the Buddha rejects their offer. Instead he summons forth innumerable bodhisattvas who leap forth joyfully from beneath the earth. They are led by four great bodhisattvas, headed by Bodhisattva Jogyo (Bodhisattva Superior Practices). The Buddha entrusts them to protect, read, recite and widely preach the Lotus Sutra. Bodhisattva Jogyo, therefore, represents, in a general sense, those who will spread the teachings after the Buddha's death.

The Ceremony in the Air, the Treasure Tower, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas from throughout the universe and the Bodhisattvas of the Earth who gather at the Ceremony—all are expressions of the profound ceremony that took place within the Buddha's life. In this way, Shakyamuni communicated to the world the grandeur of the state of life to which he had awakened. Thus Bodhisattva Jogyo should not be viewed as a historical person who appeared at a particular place or time, but as a function of the Buddha's life. When Nichiren Daishonin refers to the reincarnation of Bodhisattva Jogyo, he is, in one sense, referring to a "rebirth" of that important function—the function of the Buddha to spread the teaching that can save humankind from suffering. By equating himself to Bodhisattva Jogyo, Nichiren Daishonin expresses his conviction that he is the first to fulfill that function in the Latter Day of the Law.

THE Daishonin set forth his own "Ceremony in the Air," in the form of the Gohonzon, in order to communicate his state of life as the Buddha of absolute freedom to all people of the Latter Day of the Law; and to allow them to bring forth the very same life-condition.

SGI President Ikeda explains:

The Ceremony in the Air ... does not occur in a specific historical time or place. For precisely this reason, we can attend the Ceremony in the Air at any time and in any place.

When we pray to the Gohonzon, which depicts the Ceremony in the Air, in the present moment, we become one with the eternal and universal life; and, right where we are, we manifest the vast state of life to be able to survey the entire universe.

In that sense, our daily practice of gongyo and chanting daimoku is a "journey of life" of an even grandeur scale than that of an astronaut looking down on Earth from outer space. (March 1997 *Living Buddhism*, p. 35)

The main theme of the five chapters of the Lotus Sutra, beginning with "The Teacher of the Law" (10th) chapter to the "Peaceful Practices" (14th) chapter, focuses on to whom Shakyamuni will entrust with the mission to spread the Law after his passing. And, as previously mentioned, in the fifteenth chapter, innumerable bodhisattvas emerge from the earth. They are unlike the gods or other heavenly deities participating in the Ceremony in the Air who descended from heaven. Their emergence from the earth is symbolic of their being ordinary people. In one sense,

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the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai interprets the "earth" as life's fundamental principle from which all phenomena of the universe derive. Nichiren Daishonin revealed this to be the Mystic Law or Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. In other words, the Bodhisattvas of the Earth are ordinary people who manifest the power of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and fulfill their mission to propagate the Law to others.

Regarding the role of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, the Daishonin cites the following passage from the "Supernatural Powers of the Thus Come One" (21st) chapter of the Lotus Sutra: "Just as the light of the sun and moon illuminates all obscurity, this person will practice among the people and dispel the darkness of all beings." "The darkness of all beings" signifies delusions—such as greed, anger and foolishness—that obscure the truth of people's lives, leading them to confusion and suffering. On a societal level, "the darkness" refers to misleading ideologies and religions or mistaken ideas that deny or trivialize the nobility and strength of the human potential rooted in the Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. In other words, the role of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth is to help people rid themselves of delusions and awaken to their inherent nobility and strength while refuting thoughts and ideas that obscure human potential.

Since the mission of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth is to empower the lives of ordinary people, they invariably experience resistance and oppression from those who benefit from maintaining an ignorant and docile populace. The "Encouraging Devotion" (13th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra predicts the physical and verbal abuse that those who spread the Law after Shakyamuni's passing will experience. The chapter also explains how those in religious authority will try to incite the government and public to oppress the practitioners of the Lotus Sutra.

IN this letter, the Daishonin explains how his life has fulfilled the predictions in the Lotus Sutra confirming his identity and mission as Bodhisattva Jogyo, the leader of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. Just as Bodhisattva Jogyo "will practice among the people and dispel the darkness of all beings," the Daishonin lived among the people, unlike other Buddhist monks who lived in seclusion, apart from the people.

The Daishonin's letters written to lay believers and his continuous effort to teach the wisdom and self-reliance of Buddhism to ordinary people are testament to his "practicing among the people."

The Daishonin also states in this letter that the practitioner of the Lotus Sutra "will face exile and execution." Here the Daishonin refers to the passages from the "Encouraging Devotion" (13th) chapter: "Again and again we will be banished to a place far removed from towers and temples" and "There will be many ignorant people who ... will attack us with swords and staves" (LS13, 193-195). Exactly as predicted in the Lotus Sutra, the Daishonin was exiled to Izu from 1261 to 1263, and to Sado Island from 1271 to 1274. Furthermore, he was nearly beheaded in 1271 during the Tatsunokuchi Persecution. These persecutions were the reactions from religious and political authorities to his popular movement for the spiritual empowerment of the people.

A chief conspirator behind the persecutions was the priest Ryokan of

Gokuraku-ji temple (1217–1303). He was revered by many as a saint because he contributed to the construction of bridges and built facilities for lepers. But beneath the mask of a benevolent priest, Ryokan exploited his powerful political influence. He secured the right to levy taxes on travelers at highway checkpoints and amassed a fortune. He also profited from a money-lending business.

When the Daishonin revealed this hypocrisy, Ryokan and other prominent priests of Kamakura demanded that the Daishonin be banished. He even requested that the government execute the Daishonin. Also, it was Ryokan who schemed to sever the relationships of the Ikegami family members, who were leading followers of the Daishonin.

Such a malicious nature, when cloaked in priestly authority, is difficult to discern. The Daishonin clearly saw that the religious authority of his day was conspiring with the government to oppress the populace and profit from their spiritual dependence. The Daishonin revealed these priests' duplicity and refuted their teachings, awakening people to their own inherent nobility and strength. It was, therefore, only natural that the Daishonin suffered numerous persecutions from the power structure.

Throughout these persecutions, Ikegami Munenaka stood by the Daishonin and remained true to his faith. His final victory was converting his father from being a follower of Ryokan, to a follower of the Daishonin, despite his having been disowned twice. In this letter, the Daishonin praises Munenaka's courageous faith, saying, "You, too, are surely assisting Bodhisattva Jogyo's efforts of propagation."

THE SGI has always been dedicated to the spiritual empowerment of ordinary people through the Daishonin's Buddhism and, as a result, has gone through numerous persecutions. In order to protect freedom of religion and the integrity of the Daishonin's Buddhism, the first president of the Soka Gakkai, Makiguchi, and the second president, Toda, were imprisoned during World War II. The founders of the SGI movement fought against the powerful Japanese military regime while the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood abandoned them and supported the government authority. Recently the SGI has suffered malicious attacks by Japan's politicized tabloid media. The onslaught of misinformation against the SGI can be viewed as a modern-day equivalent of being attacked by "swords and staves," as mentioned in the sutra. When the priesthood excommunicated SGI members in 1991, it was as if, as the sutra says, they were "banished to a place far removed from towers and temples."

Despite all these obstacles, the SGI has continued to spread the Daishonin's Buddhism. Presently, in 128 countries, people are enjoying the benefits of spiritual empowerment and self-reliance achieved through their faith. Each SGI member striving to uphold the Law deserves to be called a person who is "surely assisting Bodhisattva Jogyo's efforts of propagation." □

(Background and commentary by SGI-USA Study Department)

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1. *Kan*: An old monetary unit of coins that had a hole in the middle. One *kan* consisted of 1,000 coins strung together with a cord. During the Daishonin's time, one *kan* of coins could buy about five bushels of rice, enough to feed an average adult for a year.
2. First five hundred years of the Latter Day of the Law: The last of the five five-hundred-year periods following Shakyamuni's death. It corresponds to the beginning of the Latter Day of the Law. According to the Sutra of the Great Assembly, this period is one of contention and strife in which the power of Shakyamuni's Buddhism will wane.
3. Bodhisattva Jogyo: Leader of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth who appears in the "Emerging from the Earth" (15th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra and vows to propagate the sutra along with other Bodhisattvas of the Earth in the Latter Day of the Law.
4. Five characters of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo: The five characters are *myo*, *ho*, *ren*, *ge* and *kyo*. In Nichiren Daishonin's writings, Myoho-renge-kyo is often used synonymously with Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, which consists of seven Chinese characters.
5. Lotus Sutra, chapter 21. Please note that this quotation of the Lotus Sutra is from Burton Watson's translation (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 276). Volume six of *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* uses an earlier tentative translation.
6. Cyclical sign: One of the sixty calendar signs, which are based on the twelve animal signs of the Chinese zodiac and the ten elements of nature according to the old Chinese traditions.

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