

Nov and Dec Study of Nichiren Daishonin's writings "Letter from Sado"

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

One who climbs a high mountain must eventually descend. One who slights another will in turn be despised. One who deprecates those of handsome appearance will be born ugly. One who robs another of food and clothing is sure to fall into the world of hunger.¹ One who mocks noble men or anyone who observes the precepts will be born to a poor family. One who slanders a family that embraces the True Law will be born to a heretical family. One who laughs at those who cherish the precepts will be born a commoner and meet with persecution from his sovereign. This is the general law of cause and effect.

Nichiren's sufferings, however, are not ascribable to this causal law. In the past he despised the votaries of the Lotus Sutra and ridiculed the sutra itself, sometimes with exaggerated praise and other times with contempt. He has met all eight² of these terrible sufferings for such acts against the Lotus Sutra which is as magnificent as two jewels combined, two moons shining side by side, two stars conjoined or one Mount Hua placed atop another.³ Usually these sufferings would torment a person over many lifetimes, appearing one at a time, but Nichiren has denounced the enemies of the Lotus Sutra so severely that all eight descended upon him at once. His situation is like that of a peasant heavily in debt to his lord and others. As long as he remains on the estate, they are likely to defer his debts from one year to the next, rather than mercilessly hounding him. But as soon as he tries to leave, everyone will rush over and demand that he repay everything at once. Thus the sutra states, "It is due to the blessings obtained by protecting the Law that one can diminish ... his suffering and retribution."⁴

*(The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, vol. 1. pp. 40–41) (Gosho Zenshu,
[The Collected Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, in Japanese], p. 960)*

Background: Encouragement From the Harsh Conditions of Sado Island

ON October 10, 1271, Nichiren Daishonin was exiled to Sado Island by the government in Kamakura, Japan. He was housed in a dilapidated hut at a place called Tsukahara. The one-room wooden structure offered scant shelter to those visiting an adjacent cemetery where the corpses of criminals and the poor were abandoned. He was over 50, and Nikko, 26, was the only disciple allowed to stay with him. The hut was on the estate of Honma Shigetsura, the local magistrate who was charged with keeping the Daishonin in detention. Guards were posted to prevent any outside assistance. Despite a scarcity of food, clothing and heat, they survived the winter and the Daishonin wrote this letter on March 20, 1272. It would be two years before the authorities pardoned him.

Just six months earlier, on September 12, 1271, the Daishonin was nearly executed in Kamakura, Japan's capital, due to charges of treason fabricated by priests in collusion with government officials. The priest Ryokan of Gokuraku-ji temple and Hei no Saemon, deputy chief of the Office of Military and Police

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Affairs, had longed to be rid of the Daishonin. After the authorities interrogated him, it was decided that he be exiled to Sado Island.

However, under cover of darkness, the Daishonin's enemies had him taken instead to Tatsunokuchi Beach to be beheaded. As he describes in his own writings, just as the executioner raised his sword, an unusual meteorological event occurred, lighting the beach as if it was midday. The Daishonin later wrote of the incident, "The executioner fell on his face, his eyes blinded. The soldiers were terrified and panic stricken" (MW-1, 181).

The executioner and soldiers could not carry out the execution and returned to their original plan of taking their prisoner to Sado Island, in the northern Sea of Japan where exiles rarely survived. The authorities hoped this would be the fate of the Daishonin as well.

In the capital, numerous arson fires and murders occurred, which priests of the Nembutsu and Ritsu sects blamed on followers of the Daishonin. The government, threatened by the growing popularity of the Daishonin's movement, took this opportunity to launch an all-out crackdown in Kamakura.

Regarding the circumstances of his disciples in late 1271 and in early 1272, the Daishonin writes: "During that period seven or eight cases of arson and an endless succession of murders took place in Kamakura. Slanderers went around saying that my disciples were setting the fires. Government officials thought this might be true and made up a list of over 260 of my followers who they believed should be expelled from Kamakura. Word spread that these persons were all to be exiled to remote islands and that those disciples already in prison would be beheaded. It turned out, however, that the fires were set by the Nembutsu and Ritsu believers to implicate my disciples" (MW-1, 184). He also records: "In addition, my disciples, my lay followers, and even those who have merely listened to my teachings have been subjected to severe punishment and treated as though they were guilty of treason" (MW-2, 96).

THIS attack by the government and the exile of their teacher caused many of the Daishonin's followers to renounce their faith, and his religious movement was nearly destroyed. In a letter titled "Reply to Nii-ama," he states, "When I incurred the displeasure of the government, even in Kamakura 999 out of 1,000 discarded their faith" (MW-3, 69).

Among those who remained, many harbored doubts about the Daishonin's teachings. Some criticized him, wondering, "Why do I have to encounter such obstacles even though I follow the Lotus Sutra?" "I was told that those who believe in the Lotus Sutra will be protected. Why is my teacher suffering from government persecution?"

So, although lacking in adequate food, clothing, shelter and writing materials, and despite the fact that some Nembutsu zealots on Sado were looking to kill him, the Daishonin penned this letter in order to answer his followers' doubts and to encourage them to maintain their faith despite their hardships.

The Daishonin writes at the beginning of this letter: "This letter is addressed to Toki Jonin. It should also be shown to Shijo Kingo, Tonotsuji Juro, Sajiki no Ama

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and my other disciples” (MW-1, 33). It was important to him that his message be communicated widely among his followers. The letter’s postscript reflects the severe circumstances he was under and his detailed care for individual believers: “There is very little writing paper here in the province of Sado, and to write to you individually would take too long. However, if even one person fails to hear from me, it will cause resentment. Therefore, I want all sincere believers to meet and read this letter together for encouragement” (MW-1, 42).

Second President Toda, commenting on this letter, said that “What deeply moves my heart when I read this letter is that the Daishonin extends his love for his disciples as if they were his children, even when his own life is endangered and his living conditions oppressive” (*Nichiren Daishonin Goshō Kōgi*, vol. 16, p. 174).

Commentary: “Why Are These Things Happening to Me?”

THE doubts and hardships that plagued the Daishonin’s disciples in thirteenth-century Japan are not unrelated to our own experience in the twentieth century. Many hardships occur in life—accidents, illnesses, financial problems, difficult relationships and so on. Sometimes our problems seem so overwhelming we want to ask, “Why me?” and we doubt the validity of our Buddhist practice. To answer doubts that may arise in the face of obstacles, Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter.

In this portion of the letter, the Daishonin introduces the Buddhist concept of “lessening karmic retribution”—that through faith in the Law, one can reduce the impact of negative effects resulting from past causes. He explains that he is suffering from various hardships and persecutions because he slandered the Lotus Sutra and its practitioners in past lifetimes. Such slander of the Law would lead to many lifetimes of suffering but because he is fighting to protect the Law, he is eradicating his negative karma all at once in this lifetime.

Using the Buddhist concept of karma, the Daishonin shows us a Buddhist perspective on our problems and encourages us to continue developing our faith despite our hardships.

The Sanskrit word *karma* originally meant action—our thoughts, words and deeds. Buddhism explains that all our mental, verbal and physical actions are recorded as causes within our lives. Karma may be good or bad. These latent influences or non-manifest karma, when activated by an external stimulus, produce a corresponding effect. Our actions in the past have shaped our present reality, and our actions in the present determine our future. The law of causality operates over the three existences of past, present and future, and it is karma formed in past lifetimes which accounts for the differences with which we are born in this lifetime.

In “Letter from Sado,” the Daishonin explains that usually a particular cause yields a corresponding effect. This is what he calls “the general law of cause and effect.” He gives examples such as, “One who slights another will in turn be despised.... One who mocks noble men or anyone who observes the precepts will be born to a poor

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family.... One who laughs at those who cherish the precepts will be born a commoner and meet with persecution from his sovereign.”⁵

But the concept of karma is more than “what goes around comes around.” The Daishonin explains that some actions have lasting effects over many lifetimes. For example, the act of slandering the Lotus Sutra and its practitioners will bring the eight kinds of retribution mentioned in the Hatsunaion Sutra and other innumerable sufferings. This is because the Lotus Sutra expounds the Mystic Law, the basis of all life and phenomena in the universe—it is the source of the dignity of all life. Thus the Daishonin describes the Lotus Sutra “as magnificent as two jewels combined, two moons shining side by side...” Because of the significance of the Mystic Law, one’s actions toward it will produce great effects over many lifetimes—be they positive or negative.

In order to help us grasp the concept of karma, the Daishonin first acknowledges that he is suffering from various persecutions because of his own negative karma. This acknowledgment is important because it points out that no one, not even a Buddha, is immune from karmic retribution. The law of causality does not discriminate. Also, the Daishonin declares that he is an ordinary person living with profound karmic retribution just like anyone else. He is not an immaculate saint or divine being. Commenting on “Letter from Sado,” the second President of the Soka Gakkai, Josei Toda, states:

You may think that the president [of the Soka Gakkai] is someone special. But he is not at all extraordinary. I used to frequent a pawnshop just like many of you. If some of you never had to go to a pawnshop, you should consider yourselves fortunate. I was also an expert at bouncing promissory notes. Such a person I was, but now I am very happy thanks to the Gohonzon. Unless one goes through such hardships, he or she cannot become a president [of the Soka Gakkai]. If someone calls me a living Buddha, a living Thus Come One or His Holiness the Founder, I would feel insulted. I am not such a freak. I haven’t become His Holiness the Buddha or Thus Come One. I am a great ordinary person. (From his lecture held in Osaka, Japan, on February 7, 1956, *Complete Works of Josei Toda*, vol. 6, p. 573)

The first step to change our negative karma is to accept personal responsibility for our circumstances. Accepting responsibility for our hardships is not easy, especially when we cannot trace the cause of our suffering to something we did in this lifetime. While lecturing on “Letter from Sado,” President Toda explained that our karma does not attack us from the outside, but originates from within us: “You sometimes say that you were attacked by your karma. But please don’t use that expression because your karma doesn’t attack you. For example, when you go to the bathroom, waste comes out of your body. It does not attack you. Likewise, karma comes out [of your own life]; you don’t get attacked by it” (Ibid., p. 581).

Many children today blame their unfortunate circumstances on their parents. However, Buddhism explains that our parents merely provided a particular set

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of circumstances into which we were born by our own choice of karmic causality. So we cannot blame anyone, even our parents, for our misery.

Pre-Lotus Sutra teachings explain that one's suffering in this lifetime is due to his or her past negative karma, but they fail to point out the means of changing it. This led people to accept their suffering with a sense of resignation, with a sense of burden.

The Lotus Sutra resolves this misconception of karma. It states:

...you should understand that these persons voluntarily relinquish the reward due them for their pure deeds and, in the time after I have passed into extinction, because they pity living beings, they are born in this evil world so they may broadly expound this sutra. If one of these good men or good women in the time after I have passed into extinction is able to secretly expound the Lotus Sutra to one person, even one phrase of it, then you should know that he or she is the envoy of the Thus Come One. He has been dispatched by the Thus Come One and carries out the Thus Come One's work. (*The Lotus Sutra*, ch. 10, pp. 161–62)

In other words, the practitioners of the Lotus Sutra voluntarily discarded their good karma and created evil karma to be born in an evil age to propagate the Mystic Law. The Great Teacher Miao-lo of China (711–782) interpreted this phrase as to signify the principle of “deliberately creating the appropriate karma” (Jp. *ganken'ogo*).

Such a concept leads us to argue, “I don't think I ever asked to be poor or sick in this lifetime!” Of course, there is no way of knowing if in our past lifetimes we “deliberately” created the “appropriate karma” to be in the circumstances that we find ourselves. However, if we can apply this principle, we can transform our way of life, our attitude toward our hardships. By understanding this principle, our negative karma transforms itself into our mission. This is the key to changing our negative karma.

Instead of regarding our hardships as a fixed destiny or as baggage we must carry around throughout our lives, we can, through the perspective presented in the Lotus Sutra, view our hardships as opportunities to fulfill our mission. By challenging our circumstances with a strong sense of mission and attaining victories through faith, we give courage and hope to others. For those who accept the Lotus Sutra's perspective on karma, our karmic retribution serves as a source of energy to propel us forward.

In this regard, President Ikeda writes in *The New Human Revolution*:

It is true that Buddhism teaches that one who commits evil deeds against others will receive the negative effects of those actions and live an unhappy life. This is just one aspect, however. Were it the entire teaching on karma, then people would be doomed to live under a cloud of guilt and vague anxiety, not knowing what offenses they might have committed in past lives. It would also mean that people's destiny was fixed—a concept that could easily rob them of their energy and passion. It might also cause people

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to lapse into a passive way of life, simply concerning themselves with not doing anything bad.

The Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin goes far beyond the framework of superficial causality. It elucidates the most fundamental cause and shows us the means for returning to the pure life within that has existed since time without beginning. This fundamental cause is to awaken to our mission as Bodhisattvas of the Earth and dedicate our lives to the widespread propagation of the Law.

Shin'ichi said: "Buddhism teaches that its practitioners 'voluntarily choose to be born in evil circumstances so they may help others.' This means that although we have accumulated the benefit through Buddhist practice to be born in favorable circumstances, we have purposely chosen to be born in the midst of suffering people and there propagate the Mystic Law....

"So you see, the deeper and greater the suffering, the more magnificently one can show proof of the powerful benefit of Buddhism. You could say that karma is another name for mission." (Vol. 1, pp. 252–55)

In "Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra," President Ikeda also writes:

To simply view your sufferings as "karma" is backward-looking. We should have the attitude: "These are sufferings I took on for the sake of my mission. I vowed to overcome these problems through faith."

When we understand this principle of "deliberately creating the appropriate karma," our frame of mind is transformed; what we had previously viewed as destiny, we come to see as mission. There is absolutely no way we cannot overcome sufferings that are the result of a vow that we ourselves made. (*Living Buddhism*, February 1997, p. 37)

Once we accept responsibility for our circumstances with a sense of mission as indicated in the Lotus Sutra, the final step needed to change our negative karma is to take action. In this letter, the Daishonin quotes a passage from the Hatsunaion Sutra: "It is due to the blessings obtained by protecting the Law that one can diminish in this lifetime his or her suffering and retribution."

By "protecting the Law," we can transform our negative karma into a source of happiness and encouragement for others to follow. "Protecting the Law" is to protect not only the integrity of Buddhism but also those who practice Buddhism. In other words, we are "protecting the Law" when we support one another and share Buddhism with others. We are also "protecting the Law" when we fight against injustice or attempts to betray the spirit of the Daishonin's Buddhism. The Daishonin states that he himself was able to diminish his karmic retribution by "denouncing the enemies of the Lotus Sutra."

When we view our lives in the light of the Daishonin's Buddhism, practicing as he taught, something profound takes place—we begin to transform our negative karma. Conspicuous changes in our problems may not appear immediately, but we will start experiencing more important changes internally.

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Our outlook on life will change. We will find the inner resources to challenge any obstacle with the will to win.

The Daishonin reassures us that we should regard hardships as a sign that our negative karma is changing. “Good” karma that we can accumulate through protecting the Law is so immense that we diminish whatever profound karmic retribution we would otherwise have to suffer. In this letter, he gives an example of a peasant hounded by his lord and other creditors as he tries to leave the land. It is like the peasant unexpectedly finding bars of gold in the fields. He can pay off all his debts with comparatively little money coming from his own pockets.

In “The Opening of the Eyes,” the Daishonin quotes the Sutra of the Contemplation on the Earth of the Mind: “If you want to understand the causes that existed in the past, look at the results as they are manifested in the present. And if you want to understand what results will be manifested in the future, look at the causes that exist in the present” (MW-2, 172). Our past does not exist in history books. Nor does our future lie in the mind of a fortuneteller. Both our eternal past and eternal future exist in the present moment.

Past causes exist now as effects in the present and future effects exist now as causes in the present. The principle of karmic causality tells us that by changing our lives in the present, we can shape our future and even change the meaning of our past. No matter what painful event we experienced in the past or no matter what horrible act we might have committed in our past existences, if we view our present circumstances as an opportunity to prove our mission as Bodhisattvas of the Earth then even our past is entirely different from the past that would otherwise make us miserable.

President Ikeda writes in his poem “The Sun of *Jiyu* Over a New Land”:

Past, present, future...
The causes and effects of the three existences
flow ceaselessly as the reality of life;
interlinked, they give rise to all
differences and distinction.
Trapped in those differences
human society is wracked by
unending contention.

But the Buddhism of True Cause,
expounded by the Daishonin whose
teachings we embrace,
enables us to break the spell
of past karma, past causes and effects,
and to awaken to the grand humanity
—the life of *jiyu*—
that had lain dormant in our hearts....

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Awaken to the life of *jiyu* within!
When the bright sun of “True Cause” rises,
the stars and planets of
past cause and effect grow dim
and the supreme world of
harmonious unity emerges—
the unity of friends and comrades,
each manifesting the life-condition
of the Bodhisattva of the Earth,
offering timeless proof that, indeed,
“the assembly on Eagle Peak has not yet dispersed.”
(March 1993, *Seikyo Times*, p. 54)

Our karma is not a chain to bind our spirit. When our lives are infused with a sense of mission as Bodhisattvas of the Earth we are able to live free and fulfilled lives. □

(Background and commentary by SGI-USA Study Department)

1. The world of Hunger: The second lowest of the ten worlds in which one’s existence is controlled and tormented by insatiable desires for wealth, fame or pleasure. The ten worlds are ten states of life that manifest in both physical and spiritual aspects of all human activities. They are Hell, Hunger, Animality, Anger, Tranquillity or Humanity, Rapture or Heaven, Learning, Realization, Bodhisattva and Buddhahood. All ten are eternally inherent in life and emerge through people’s interaction with their environment.
2. All eight: The Daishonin writes in the portion preceding the passage printed here: “For none, save Nichiren, have experienced all eight sufferings described in the [Hatsunaion] sutra: (1) to be slighted; (2) to possess an ugly physical form; (3) to lack clothing; (4) to lack food; (5) to seek wealth in vain; (6) to be born to a poor family; (7) to be born to a heretical family; and (8) to be persecuted by one’s sovereign” (MW-1, 40).
3. Mount Hua: One of the five highest mountains in China.
4. The Hatsunaion Sutra: (Sutra of the Final Nirvana) One of several varying translations of the Nirvana Sutra. The complete passage reads, “It is due to the blessings obtained by protecting the Law that one can diminish in this lifetime his suffering and retribution.”
5. In this instance, “noble men or anyone who observes the precepts” indicates those who keep the Theravada precepts, and “those who cherish the precepts” are those who keep the Mahayana precepts.