

## Study Material for September • October “A Letter of Condolence”

*(The following passage is taken from the book Learning From the Gosho: The Eternal Teachings of Nichiren Daishonin by SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, pp. 154–64.)*

### The Buddha Shares Others’ Sufferings

A STRONG person is gentle. “Birds cry, but never shed tears. I, Nichiren, do not cry, but my tears flow ceaselessly” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 94). Nichiren Daishonin wrote these famous words while in exile on Sado Island. He had great and abounding compassion. He was the perfect embodiment of profound feeling and towering wisdom.

Dostoevsky writes, “Great ideas spring not so much from noble intelligence as from noble feeling.”<sup>1</sup>

Buddhism is a religion of compassion and wisdom—these are inseparable. A person of true wisdom has unparalleled compassion. A person of deep compassion embodies the wisdom of Buddhism.

The Japanese word for compassion, *jishi*, includes the meaning of suffering together or crying out in sympathy with others. The Buddha first of all shares others’ sufferings.

Take the case of a mother whose child has died, who is sitting in a daze on the roadside. Probably no words can heal her heart. And passersby, unable to do anything, will have no choice but to walk briskly past. Occasionally, a cleric may stop before her and try to instruct her with a look of affected enlightenment. But no one can truly share her grief.

No matter how science advances, even though it can send a human being into outer space, it cannot assuage a mother’s sorrow. Maybe only the words of a woman who has been in the same situation can reach her.

What would the Buddha do in such an instance? He would probably sit down at the mother’s side. And he might simply continue sitting there, not saying a word. Even if no words were exchanged, the mother would sense the warm reverberations of the Buddha’s concern. She would feel the pulse of the Buddha’s life. Eventually, she would lift up her face, and before her eyes would be the face of the Buddha who understands all her sorrows. The Buddha would nod and the mother would nod in reply.

Even without words, there is no greater encouragement than heart-to-heart exchange. On the other hand, even if a million words are spoken, nothing will be communicated in the absence of heartfelt exchange.

At length the Buddha would stand up, and the mother, as though following his example, would probably also rise. Then, together, they would move forward one step, then another — their way gently illuminated by the light of the moon. The Buddha would tirelessly offer encouragement, until the mother could lift her head high, until she could determine to lead a life of great value for the sake of her deceased child.

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The Buddha is sometimes gentle, sometimes stern, sometimes offering bouquets of words and sometimes taking action with those suffering. To the mother, the Buddha is a true ally, for he empathizes with her sufferings and brings her the greatest peace of mind. For this reason, the Buddha's words penetrate her life.

At its roots, compassion is the spirit to suffer alongside and pray with those suffering. The Daishonin possessed such a spirit. He joined Ueno-ama Gozen, the mother of Nanjo Tokimitsu (Lord Ueno),<sup>2</sup> in her grief and tears when her youngest son, Shichiro Goro, died at the tender age of 16. He continued to offer her encouragement until she regained the will to go on living.

During the first year or so after Shichiro Goro's death, the Daishonin sent approximately ten letters to the Nanjo family. We can imagine how his deep concern must have warmed their grieving hearts.

Starting with this installment, we will begin studying a number of letters sent to the Nanjo family by the Daishonin—and the human drama that they tell.

### Letter to a Bereaved Family

**On the matter of the death of Nanjo Shichiro Goro, all people, once born, are certain to die. This is known to all people, both the wise and the foolish, both those of high and low standing. Therefore, when that time comes, one should not lament or be alarmed as though learning this for the first time. I have borne this in mind myself and also taught it to others. But since the time has actually arrived, I cannot help wondering even now whether this [Shichiro Goro's death] is a dream or fantasy. (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1567)<sup>3</sup>**

Just as there is the drama of joy upon the birth of a child, there is the drama of grief upon the death of a loved one. In the fall of 1280, these two dramas played out one after the other in the Nanjo family.

The drama of joy was the birth of a son. In a letter dated August 26 of that year, the Daishonin expresses his delight to Nanjo Tokimitsu and his wife on their being blessed with a son in addition to their infant daughter. The Daishonin named the boy Hiwaka Gozen (GZ, 1566).

It must have been deeply moving for the couple that the name he selected contained the Chinese character for the word *sun* (Jpn *hi*), which forms part of the Daishonin's name, Nichiren (i.e., the same character is also pronounced *nichi*). This was one year after the Atsuhara Persecution,<sup>4</sup> and they must have felt that the weariness from their difficult struggles had in an instant been swept away. Above all, Tokimitsu's mother, Ueno-ama Gozen, was deeply moved by the birth of a grandson who would succeed as head of the family, and by the Daishonin's congratulatory message.

But only ten days later, on September 5, the Nanjo household was visited by misfortune. Tokimitsu's youngest brother, Shichiro Goro, died suddenly. He was only 16. While the cause of his death is unknown, it must have been very sudden and unexpected. Their celebration of the birth of a son and grandson was

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overturned, replaced by sorrow at Shichiro Goro's death. The family's grief knew no bounds.

The Daishonin, too, was surprised by this turn of events. As soon as the messenger bearing news of Shichiro Goro's death arrived, the Daishonin immediately wrote a reply to Tokimitsu, the "Letter of Condolence," which we are studying this time, dated September 6.

The impermanence of life is inescapable. In Buddhism, this is a fundamental premise about the nature of existence. Why should death come as a shock? From the standpoint of life's eternity, it could be said that birth and death are occurrences of minuscule significance. That is all well and good in theory, but the human heart cannot fully come to terms with such events through theory alone.

The Daishonin was thoroughly human, a most humane person. Hearing the unexpected report, he was in disbelief. He wondered whether it was "a dream or fantasy." Further on, he indicates that he is in such turmoil he doesn't feel up to continuing to write. These words must have expressed the feelings of the bereaved family members as well.

In the letter "Sad News of Lord Goro's Death,"<sup>5</sup> which is thought to have been written to Nanjo Tokimitsu about a week later, the Daishonin says:

Until now I have repeatedly thought to myself that the matter of Nanjo Shichiro Goro's death must have been a dream or a fantasy, or certainly untrue, but it is again mentioned in your letter. And so, for the first time, I have become convinced of its truth. (GZ, 1566)

The Daishonin says that he has had a hard time accepting Shichiro Goro's death. What compassion the original Bud-dha shows! He mourns the death of this young follower, just as a parent would.

The Daishonin inscribed his immense compassion for all humankind in the Gohonzon. He says: "Suffer what there is to suffer, enjoy what there is to enjoy. Regard both suffering and joy as facts of life and continue chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo, no matter what happens" (MW-1, 161). Just as he says, in both times of joy and times of sadness, everything will turn out for the best if we continue chanting daimoku.

Someone may expound a fine teaching while abiding in a place of comfort and safety— but that is not Buddhism. A genuine Buddha lives among the people, grieves and suffers with them and shares their hopes and laughter. That's how the original Buddha, Nichiren Daishonin, conducted himself.

Above all, the Daishonin did not blithely brandish theories of karma. Making condescending pronouncements to suffering people like, "That's just your karma," will only add to their misery. Someone battling destiny feels like there is a gale raging through his or her heart. When we encounter people in such a state, we should stand with them in the rain, become sopping wet with them, and work with them to find a way out of the storm. In the end, that's probably all another human being can do.

Even if the attempt is not totally successful, through making this effort we

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forge a bond between ourselves and the other person. This is not mere sympathy or sentimentality. The effort to regard someone else's suffering as our own and thus offer prayer for its resolution creates a life-to-life bond. Through this bond one person touches another's life.

### **'Eternal Family' of the Mystic Law**

**Above all, how your mother [Ueno-ama Gozen] must be grieving. She was preceded in death both by her parents and siblings, and she was bereaved of her beloved husband. Still, her many children must have been a comfort to her.**

**[Shichiro Goro] was a charming child and, moreover, a boy. He was very handsome and brave and had a trustworthy look. He made others feel refreshed. His having died so young, however, while defying reason, is like the buds of a flower being withered by the wind, or the full moon suddenly waning.**

**It doesn't seem real to me [that he has died], and so I do not feel inclined to continue. I will write you again.**

**With my deep respect,**

**Nichiren**

**The sixth day of the ninth month of 1280**

**Postscript: When I met him on June 15, he struck me as a lad of splendid spirit and as very gallant. I am most sad that I will not be able to see him again.**

**Still, since he believed deeply in Shakyamuni Bud-dha and the Lotus Sutra, in his last moment he was splendidly composed. He certainly went to the pure land of Eagle Peak where his father dwells. They must have had a joyful reunion. How wonderful! How wonderful! (GZ, 1567-68)**

Ueno-ama Gozen had experienced a great deal of suffering. Her husband, Nanjo Hyoe Shichiro, died in 1265. He was still in the prime of his life and ought to have had many years ahead of him. He was survived by five sons and four daughters, all still young when he died; Tokimitsu, the second son, was only 7. Shichiro Goro, the youngest child and fifth son, was still in his mother's womb when his father died. In another Gosho, Nichiren Daishonin writes to Ueno-ama Gozen:

When your husband, the late Lord Ueno, preceded you in death, he was still in the prime of life and your grief on that occasion was no shallow matter.

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Had you not been pregnant with his child, I know you would have followed him through fire and water. Yet when this son was safely born, you felt that it would be unthinkable to entrust his upbringing to another so that you could put an end to your life. Thus you encouraged yourself and spent the following fourteen or fifteen years raising your children. (MW-7, 247–48)

The child to whom he refers is Shichiro Goro, who had now suddenly died. The mother looked forward to the growth of Tokimitsu and Shichiro Goro with high hopes. Shichiro Goro was handsome, intelligent and well liked by others. It also appears that he was very dutiful toward his mother.

It seems as though even the Daishonin was at a loss as to how to encourage the mother. He conveys his feelings openly and candidly. The mother, her heart made sensitive by sadness, must have keenly felt the Daishonin's kindness, which pervades each line of the condolence letter he sent to the Nanjo family via Nanjo Tokimitsu. How the Daishonin's warmth must have consoled her grief-stricken heart! Simply having someone who understands everything can give us the strength to go on living.

In the postscript, the Daishonin reiterates his regret at the death of this youth who had such a promising future.

When Nanjo Hyoe Shichiro died, the Daishonin wrote: "While he was in this world, he was a living Buddha, and now, he is a Buddha in death. His Buddhahood transcends both life and death" (MW-2 [2nd ed.], 207).

The Daishonin teaches that someone who embraces the Mystic Law, even though his or her life may be short, is a Buddha in both life and death. In the postscript to "A Letter of Condolence," the Daishonin says that without doubt Shichiro Goro has been reunited with his father at Eagle Peak.

In another letter, he writes to Ueno-ama Gozen:

You must feel that if only [your son Shichiro Goro] had left word where you could go to meet him, then without wings, you would soar to the heavens, or without a boat, you would cross over to China. If you heard that he was in the bowels of the earth, then how could you fail to dig through the earth?

And yet there is a way to meet him readily. With Shakyamuni Buddha as your guide, you can go to meet him in the pure land of Eagle Peak. (MW-7, 262)

The Daishonin tells Ueno-ama Gozen that she can definitely meet her son at Eagle Peak. Time and again, the Daishonin offers her warm encouragement.

It is extremely difficult to understand the impact that losing a child has on a mother. Even now, I cannot forget how my mother looked when she received official notification that my eldest brother had died in the war. She turned away, her shoulders went limp and her body seemed fraught with grief. My mother did not cry in front of us, but I had the clear sense that from that day she aged considerably.

Such is the cruelty of war. I will fight with my life to oppose war, which

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plunges mothers the world over into sorrow and grief.

For the happiness of all mothers and children, for the creation of a society where they can all look up at blue skies with smiling faces—toward this end, we are striving to develop a great undercurrent of compassion in society. This is the great objective of our movement. □

1. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Eternal Husband*, trans. Constance Garnett (London: William Heineman, 1917), p. 105.
2. Ueno is the name of a village near Mount Fuji of which Nanjo Hyoe Shichiro, and later his son Nanjo Tokimitsu, was steward. Lord Ueno refers to the head of the family; at the time of this writing, Nanjo Tokimitsu.
3. “Ueno Dono Gohenji” (*Gosho Zenshu*, pp. 1567–68), written in September 1280 when the Daishonin was 59. It is addressed to Nanjo Tokimitsu (Lord Ueno).
4. Atsuhara Persecution: A series of threats and acts of violence against followers of Nichiren Daishonin in Atsuhara Village near Ueno, beginning in 1278. The persecution culminated in 1279 when three farmers were executed for refusing to abandon their faith. Nanjo Tokimitsu used his influence to protect believers during this time, sheltering some in his home and negotiating for the release of others who had been imprisoned. The government punished him for his role by levying severe taxes on his estate, forcing him to live in poverty.
5. “Nanjo Dono Gohenji” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1566).

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