

Study Material Background
Faith As the Fundamental Purpose of Our Lives
By SGI-USASTudy Department

NICHIREN Daishonin wrote "The Ultimate Teaching Affirmed by All Buddhas of Past, Present and Future" while living at Mount Minobu in October 1279 when he was 58. Since the original document is no longer extant, its precise background and recipient remain uncertain. One theory holds that the recipient was Toki Jonin, one of the Daishonin's earliest converts and a leading lay follower of erudition. Jonin received many letters from the Daishonin and catalogued them, but this writing is not listed.

The year 1279 was tumultuous for the entire nation of Japan, as well as for the Daishonin and his disciples. Basic necessities such as food, clothing and shelter were so inadequate at Mount Minobu that his health was deteriorating. In July of this year, Hojo Tokimune, a regent of the shogunate government in Kamakura, ordered the beheading of a Mongol envoy who carried a message from Kublai Khan demanding that Japan capitulate to Mongolia. Other delegations had come years earlier followed by a nearly successful invasion in 1274. The military might of the Mongols far surpassed that of the small island country of Japan and the entire nation feared a second attack.

In September, alarmed by the rapid spread of the Daishonin's teaching, Gyochi, a deputy chief priest of Ryusen-ji, a Tendai school temple in the Atsuhara area of Suruga Province (present-day Shizuoka Prefecture), schemed to have twenty peasants who practiced the Daishonin's Buddhism arrested on a false charge. They were transferred to Kamakura and tried by Hei no Saemon, the deputy chief of the Office of the Military and Police Affairs, a powerful political figure who schemed to oppress the Daishonin and his followers for many years. Since none of the peasants renounced their faith, three of them eventually were executed, and the rest were banished. On October 12, in the midst of this persecution befalling his lay followers, the Daishonin inscribed the Dai-Gohonzon for the sake of all people, thus fulfilling the purpose of his advent. In the same month, the Daishonin penned this letter. No doubt the plight of the Atsuhara peasants weighed heavily on his mind as he wrote. As is clear from his intent behind his inscription of the Dai-Gohonzon, the Daishonin's heart must have burned with a profound passion for humanity's peace and happiness.

In this letter, the Daishonin affirms that the Lotus Sutra is "the ultimate teaching affirmed by all Buddhas of past, present and future," a designation that also became the letter's title. He contrasts the Lotus Sutra with the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings from various perspectives. Through his careful examination, the Daishonin demonstrates that the Lotus Sutra directly reveals the Buddha's enlightenment, while the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings are provisional in the sense that they were expounded in accord with the various conditions and capacities of the people. He concludes that the Lotus Sutra contains the essential truth of Buddhism and that the practical application of the sutra enables the ordinary people of the Latter Day to attain enlightenment.

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In his lecture on this letter carried in this section, SGI President Ikeda writes: “We have to develop ourselves. As the Daishonin says, ‘Arouse deep faith and polish your mirror night and day’ (MW-1, 5). That is the fundamental objective of life and the conclusion of ‘The Ultimate Teaching Affirmed by All Buddhas of Past, Present and Future.’” Here he further clarifies the essential point of this letter, in which the Daishonin states: “To suppose that the Buddha, the Law and the pure land of Eagle Peak exist apart from one’s life and to seek them outside is a delusion.”

Put another way, the essential message of this letter is to develop faith, that is, to strengthen the conviction that within us we possess “the Buddha,” “the Law” and “the pure land of Eagle Peak.” Here, the Buddha may be described in more general terms as the supreme essence of humanity; the Law as the law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, which gives rise to all activities in the universe; and the pure land of Eagle Peak, a metaphor often employed by the Daishonin for the state of enlightenment, or the indestructible happiness of Buddhahood. To have such belief or conviction is what is meant by faith in the Gohonzon.

Regarding the importance of faith, President Ikeda also writes: “With the view of life existing eternally over past, present and future, establishing solid faith becomes the fundamental concern. We should make establishing solid faith our main purpose in this existence.”

Establishing and strengthening faith, then, is our fundamental objective as Buddhists. But isn’t faith a means to an end, not the end itself? It is certainly the means to achieve a genuine, enduring level of happiness that is synonymous with what we call Buddhahood, or enlightenment.

The word *faith* of course means belief, but there are many forms and degrees of belief, not all of which are good or positive. In the Daishonin’s Buddhism, however, we delve deeper into the meaning of faith. In our practice, faith may be interpreted as our state of life, a state of life in which nothing can sway our confidence that “the Buddha,” “the Law” and “the pure land” exist in our lives no matter what our circumstances. Such confidence, such conviction, when coupled with prayer and practice, has the power to call forth dynamically these very qualities from within us. It also allows us to fully appreciate and respect that potential in others. Having full access to our highest intrinsic qualities—qualities such as life force and wisdom—we cannot be anything but happy. This is what it means to be a Buddha. Viewed this way, faith is synonymous to happiness. In this regard, Nichikan, the twenty-sixth high priest of Taiseki-ji, who was known for his efforts to correct the errors brought into his school by his predecessors and restore the orthodoxy of the Daishonin’s teaching, comments: “The heart that strongly believes in the Lotus Sutra is itself called Buddhahood.”

The stronger the faith we develop, therefore, the more enduring the happiness we build within our lives. To realize that we do not have to seek happiness outside, that an inexhaustible source of happiness and fortune exists within us, is to have faith, to become happy. In “The Ultimate Teaching Affirmed by All Buddhas of Past, Present and Future,” the Daishonin drives this point home. □