

**Gain and Loss: Offering Our Lives**  
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If there is a common thread that weaves itself through the fabric of the Lotus Sutra, it is this: Those who praise and make offerings to the Law and its votaries will receive immeasurable benefit, while those who criticize or belittle the Law and its votaries will suffer loss. Over and over again, Shakyamuni directs this message to different members of the assembly who have gathered to hear him. So, it should come as no surprise that these two concepts, gain and loss, appear on the Gohonzon.

Nichiren Daishonin says of the word *nam* in “The Gift of Rice”: “This word derives from Sanskrit, and means to devote one’s life. Ultimately it means to offer our lives to the Buddha” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 267). We make many different offerings to the Gohonzon, but at their heart is this concept of offering our lives.

At the top of the Gohonzon, to the left of Bodhisattva Firmly Established Practices, the Daishonin inscribed the phrase “If there is one who makes offerings, his good fortune will surpass that of making offerings to a Buddha of 10 honorable titles.” The Soka Gakkai’s second president, Josei Toda, asked in “The History and Belief of the Soka Gakkai,” “Doesn’t this signify the Gohonzon’s promise to us that we will receive benefit when we revere it?”

On the opposite side, next to Bodhisattva Boundless Practices, the inscription reads, “If you slander the Law, you will have your head broken in seven pieces.” President Toda pointed out in the same history that first Soka Gakkai president Tsunesaburo Makiguchi would often ask: “Can’t you hear the Gohonzon saying to you, ‘If you slander the Law, you will have your head broken in seven pieces’? This statement, which we can read on the Gohonzon, indicates the loss one will actually experience if one commits slander.”

“His head will be split into seven pieces” indicates a state in which people lose the ability to distinguish good from evil, gain from loss, poison from medicine. This idea is expressed in the Lotus Sutra through the parable of the excellent physician and his sick children, which we recite as part of our daily practice: “At that time the father returns to his home and finds that his children have drunk poison. Some are completely out of their minds, while others are not” (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 228). Those who can still reason take the medicine of the Law that their father offers right away, but the others refuse it. Only after the father sends a messenger to say he has died do they finally drink the medicine in his memory.

We can understand from this that these two inscriptions on the Gohonzon are not intended to permanently banish a person from happiness. Rather, they are a compass to use in navigating through daily life.

According to the Lotus Sutra, even Devadatta, who tried to kill the Buddha, eventually attained enlightenment due to the power of the Law. But only after suffering for a very long period. Both the Lotus Sutra and the Daishonin’s writings are graphic in their descriptions of the suffering that results from disregarding and slandering the Law. As President Toda pointed out, it was the mistake of forgetting this principle that led the priests of his time to compromise with military authorities — the very people who led Japan down the path to destruction during World War II.

*Seven in a series*

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