

PERSPECTIVE: Confessions of an Ex-Complainer
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New York

“Every time you complain, you choose to be helpless. You send a message to the world, I’m helpless and only interested in staying that way.”

— Dr. Louis Ormont, Director of the Center for the Advancement of Group Studies

My mentor, Dr. Ormont, said these words to me, and I experienced that stinging, numb feeling: face to face with my own karma. Nowhere to hide. I felt like I’d just discovered a part of myself I’d rather not see: a self-defeating life tendency that keeps me from growing.

Is it true? Me, a complainer? But SGI President Ikeda says complainers are cowards. I took a survey, asked my wife, close friends, etc. The results came in: It was true. I’d rather complain than take action. One friend even noted, “You do have a tendency to whine.”

Ahhhhh! When did it happen? Have I always been this way? How do I break free? What’s more, how do I slay this beast of my own creation?

I have learned through my practice of Buddhism that complaining is a result of arrogance, fear and a lack of appreciation. To complain is merely to find fault, to point the finger of blame — and that only perpetuates the problem.

Though I chanted and did activities, it was the relationship with my mentor in my field that opened my eyes. Without Dr. Ormont I may never have recognized this pattern in my life and continued to destroy my fortune by complaining.

For years I had this quote hanging over my desk at home: “Misfortune comes from one’s mouth and ruins him, but fortune comes from one’s mind and makes him worthy of respect” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 272). How little it meant until I realized it in my own life. What’s worse, each time I complained, I weakened my life.

I quoted President Ikeda, studied the Gosho, but until I contemplated my own life tendencies and took responsibility for my life-condition, my practice was only formality. President Toda said, in effect, that without faith the sutras are just books.

It was the role of my mentor that brought on this realization. That’s what mentors do. They hold up crystal-clear mirrors and force us to look. They show us the obstacles we create and reveal to us our resistance to growth. They dare us to dream. We see limits, they see potential. Identifying external obstacles to our happiness is easy but absolute happiness only comes from recognizing and overcoming our own internal demons.

Did Nichiren Daishonin complain (and boy, did he have things to complain about!)? Even with little paper available, he found ways to write letters of encouragement to his followers. Attacks on his life, banishment, constant criticism by society — he overcame all these obstacles. Yet I complain about the air conditioner being too strong at the Florida Nature and Culture Center.

Rather than complain, the Daishonin took action. He not only expected obstacles, he treasured them. In speaking with Dr. Ormont he said, “Every time you have the impulse, instead of complaining, identify what you want and go for it.”

Supported by faith, practice and study, there is no life tendency that can’t be changed, no obstacle that can’t be overcome. To do this is to “perceive the nature of your own life” (MW-1, 4). For me, to complain is to turn away from myself, avoid self-examination, and that’s equal to investing in a delusion. And since all beings possess the Buddha nature, why should I invest in a behavior that only weakens my life-condition? Why should I continue to create obstacles for myself?

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The Lotus Sutra teaches, “Phenomena have no fixed nature, the seeds of Buddhahood sprout through causation” (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 41). That means my life is nothing but the effect of my causes. And since phenomena have no fixed nature, to change myself I need only to change the causes I make. My complaining nature is not fixed — “the seeds of Buddhahood sprout through causation.” Better causes, better life!

While President Ikeda will always be my mentor in life, having a mentor in my field of work is one of my greatest joys. Especially when he reflects to me parts of myself I’d rather not see. Only then was I able to challenge myself and grow.

So all you fellow complainers out there (and you know who you are), you have a choice: You can continue to weaken your life and be a victim of your environment, or you can join me in saying: “The complaint department is closed.”

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