

STUDY MATERIAL FOR APRIL
“THE GODS SAME BIRTH AND SAME NAME”
(THE WRITINGS OF NICHIREN DAISHONIN, P. 315-16)

Both of you were born as commoners and live in Kamakura, yet you believe in the Lotus Sutra without concern for the prying eyes of others or the danger it may pose to your lives. This is nothing short of extraordinary. Though I am only guessing, it is as if a jewel had been placed in muddy water, and the water had become clear. It is as if one who was taught something new by a wise person had believed his every word and thus grasped the truth. Could Shakyamuni Buddha and the bodhisattvas Universal Worthy, Medicine King, and Constellation King Flower be dwelling in your hearts? Surely this is what is meant in the passage of the Lotus Sutra that says that those in the land of Jambudvipa who believe in this sutra do so because of the power of Bodhisattva Universal Worthy (WND, 315-16).

BACKGROUND

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter in 1272, when Shijo Kingo came from Kamakura to visit him on Sado Island where he was living in exile. It was addressed to Kingo's wife, who remained behind in Kamakura looking over the family's affairs. The text of the letter also addresses another woman, the wife of a man named Toshiro, who is apparently a friend of Nichigen-nyo and a fellow practitioner.

Both Nichigen-nyo and Kingo had been united in their strong faith, and had persevered together in their practice of the Daishonin's teachings. While Shijo Kingo's journey to visit the Daishonin on Sado was long and difficult, Nichigen-nyo's remaining behind without her husband must have been equally trying. The harsh, male-dominated nature of 13th-century Japanese society would have made it difficult for a woman staying by herself. With animosity toward the Daishonin widespread, the danger of armed physical assault on his followers was not to be dismissed.

The Daishonin thus praises the recipients of this letter, calling their sincerity "deeper even than the earth" and "loftier even than the sky" and encouraging them that all heavenly and earthly gods must be aware of this and will protect them.

Shijo Kingo was a samurai vassal of the Ema branch of the Hojo Clan. The Hojos dominated the office of Regent to the Shogun in Kamakura. With the position of shogun rendered nominal at the time, they held political and military control in Japan.

One year before, Nichiren Daishonin had faced beheading on the beach at Tatsunokuchi, but that failed execution attempt became instead a sentence of exile.

Shijo Kingo and Nichigen-nyo had actively supported the Daishonin while he was in Kamakura, and they continued to do so while he was living in exile on Sado Island, off Japan's north-eastern coast. They frequently sent offerings of needed supplies such as money, rice and oil. On this occasion, Shijo Kingo had made the arduous trip to visit the Daishonin on Sado. Upon his arrival, the Daishonin wrote this letter to Kingo's wife. It expresses the Daishonin's deep respect and concern not only for the person taking direct action to support Buddhism, but for those spouses and family members who sincerely work and support their efforts from behind the scenes.

Both of you were born as commoners and live in Kamakura, yet you believe in the Lotus Sutra without concern for the prying eyes of others or the danger it may pose to your lives. This is nothing short of extraordinary.

“Both of you” here refers to Nichigen-nyo, the wife of the Daishonin’s well-known follower Shijo Kingo, and the wife of a believer named Toshiro. Little is known about either Toshiro or his wife, but Toshiro seems to have been a samurai colleague of Shijo Kingo. The Daishonin’s reference to these two being “born as commoners” seems to imply that, while both were of the samurai class, which enjoyed a degree of status in medieval Japan, neither of their husbands was of a particularly high rank.

Because of their relatively low social status, they were vulnerable to sanctions or oppression from those with more power. In their feudal society, even a person with some social position often was completely beholden to someone of higher rank. Government officials of the highest rank were always vigilant for any potential threat to their power; whomever they deemed rebellious or defiant was severely punished.

The Daishonin mentions that the two women “live in Kamakura.” This is significant because it was the high-ranking priests of Kamakura’s Buddhist community who despised Nichiren Daishonin the most, and Kamakura was also headquarters for Japan’s military government, whose leaders deeply respected and supported those priests. Kamakura was not an easy place for those practicing Buddhism as the Daishonin’s followers. But this is exactly the position the two women were in.

“Without concern for the prying eyes of others” speaks of the women’s courage. But it does not simply mean that Nichigen-nyo and her friend were unconcerned about others’ opinions about them or about how their neighbors regarded them. In today’s image-conscious society, people often preoccupy themselves with how others view them. It might therefore be considered courageous or bold to disregard the opinions of peers or neighbors and opt to do something that is more right than popular.

However, by being open about their Buddhist practice, these two women risked much more than losing friends or being criticized. Their circumstances were such that letting others know of their association with the Daishonin would leave them open to the very real possibility of serious persecution. In fact, in years to follow, Nichigen-nyo and Shiji Kingo would face such difficulties as the confiscation of their lands and physical attack by some of Kingo’s samurai colleagues. In spite of such dangers, the two women proudly let it be known that they were the Daishonin’s disciples and openly exerted themselves in their Buddhist practice.

Among the Daishonin’s followers, a number had already had their lands and holdings confiscated, while others had been imprisoned because of their faith. In some cases, they had to prepare for the possibility of being killed. This is why the Daishonin makes a point of recognizing the women’s courage and openness in the face of such danger. In fact, a willingness to accept that danger was necessary for them to practice Buddhism.

In “Letter from Sado,” written the month before this letter, the Daishonin says, “Since nothing is more precious than life itself, one who dedicates one’s life to Buddhist practice is certain to attain Buddhahood. If one is prepared to offer one’s life, why should one begrudge any other treasure for the sake of Buddhism? On the other hand, if one is loath to part with one’s wealth, how can one possibly offer one’s life, which is far more valuable?” (WND, 301).

For the Daishonin himself, this was not merely a philosophical observation. For more

than a decade, he had repeatedly faced censure, attack and exile. Less than a year earlier, on September 12, 1271, he had sat before the executioner's sword, ready to face death.

The Daishonin records his encounter earlier that day with Hei no Saemon, the powerful deputy chief of the office of military and police affairs, and his troops who raided the Daishonin's dwelling, struck him and vandalized the sutra scrolls he kept there:

I, Nichiren, said in a loud voice, "How amusing! Look at Hei no Saemon gone mad! You gentlemen have just toppled the pillar of Japan!" Hearing this, the assembled troops were taken aback. When they saw me standing before the fierce arm of the law unafraid, they must have realized that they were in the wrong, for the color drained from their faces. (WND, 766)

The Daishonin's voice rang with the profound and absolute confidence that the teaching he was spreading with his very life was Japan's only hope in the face of impending ruin.

On the way to his own execution, the Daishonin told Shijo Kingo, who accompanied him:

Tonight I will be beheaded. This is something I have wished for many years. . . . Now is the time when I will offer my head to the Lotus Sutra and share the blessings therefrom with my deceased parents, and with my disciples and lay supporters, just as I have promised you. (WND, 767)

At the execution site, a brilliant object—later postulated to be a meteor—sliced across the pitch-black sky. Illuminating the serene face of the condemned man, it must have worked to convince the executioners, who were already in awe of the Daishonin's absolute confidence, of their own doubts. They withdrew and did not carry out the execution.

While the Daishonin's survival could certainly be attributed to the protective function of what Buddhism calls "benevolent deities"—we should be clear that these represent functions of the human life-condition. They are external responses to the inner workings of the human life force. When that life force manifests Buddhahood, they function powerfully in a supportive and protective manner. In that sense, we could say that it was the Daishonin's own absolute willingness to face death for the sake of Buddhism that saved his life. It enabled him to live on to fulfill his profound mission to save humankind from suffering and to prove the validity of that mission. He revealed his true identity as a Buddha.

A powerful aspect of the Daishonin's Buddhism is that it aims to enable all people to bring forth the same positive attributes of life as the true Buddha—as the founder, Nichiren Daishonin. The key is to chant to the Gohonzon, which embodies the Daishonin's enlightenment, with an enthusiastic willingness to face and win over any kind of challenge or difficulty that stands between us and our happiness, between things the way they are and how we envision them to be—between a world of war and suffering and a world of peace and harmony. When we do so, our own qualities as a "true Buddha of absolute happiness" naturally emerge.

None of us became a Buddhist because we were seeking persecution or abuse. In fact, few, if any of us, may ever face the degree of hardship and persecution the Daishonin or his followers did. Today, SGI President Ikeda has personally been the subject of the brunt of animosity and negativity directed at the Soka Gakkai in Japan. Here in the United States,

however, few SGI members have encountered ongoing, direct opposition on account of their faith.

The truth is that we elected to practice this Buddhism to improve our lives, to enrich our families and to live with a greater sense fulfillment. And it is the experience of millions around the world that this is indeed the outcome of sincere and consistent faith and practice.

One important aspect of creating happiness, however, is challenging and overcoming the causes for unhappiness that exist in our lives and environment. While this is not easy, philosophers of all cultures and backgrounds have lauded the value of facing adversity for forging character.

Eighteenth-century American Poet William Cullen Bryant said, “Difficulty, my brethren, is the nurse of greatness—a harsh nurse, who roughly rocks her foster-children into strength and athletic proportion.”¹

And Carl Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist and psychological theorist said, “Man needs difficulties; they are necessary for health.”²

Nichiren Daishonin showed his followers through his own actions and attitude how to regard adversity. He even attributed his ability to fulfill his mission and reveal his enlightenment to those who persecuted him most severely:

Devadatta was the foremost good friend to the Thus Come One Shakyamuni. In this age as well, it is not one’s allies but one’s powerful enemies who assist one’s progress. . . . For me, Nichiren, my best allies in attaining Buddhahood are Kagenobu, the priests Ryokan, Doryu, and Doamidabutsu, and Hei no Saemon and the lord of Sagami. I am grateful when I think that without them I could not have proved myself to be the votary of the Lotus Sutra. (WND, 770)

From this perspective, we might say that through our Buddhist practice we aim to the develop a lofty state of life that allows us to one day joyfully proclaim, for example, “Were it not for that nasty boss; my rebellious child; that illness I had to face and overcome; the ridiculous unfairness of that professor’s tests; my long struggle with poverty;. . . I could never enjoy the great degree of wisdom, strength and satisfaction I do today. I am deeply grateful for the troubles I have faced and for those who challenged me the most in life!”

And it is not even so much the presence of severe problems, but the attitude in life to approach all problems with a sense of challenge, hope and optimism that creates a healthy and fulfilling way of life.

G.C. Lichtenberg, a German physicist and philosopher of the 18th century stated it quite clearly: “It is in the gift for employing all the vicissitudes of life to one’s own advantage and to that of one’s craft that a large part of genius consists.”³

We might say that this “gift” he refers to is an important strength we aim to develop through our prayer and practice—it is an attribute of our innate enlightened nature.

And regarding the Daishonin’s stance toward adversity, SGI President Ikeda said:

In the “Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings,” the Daishonin says, “One should regard meeting obstacles as true peace and comfort” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 750). You may wonder how encountering obstacles could be a source of peace and comfort. But the truth of the matter is that through struggling against and overcoming difficulties, we can transform our destiny and attain Buddhahood. Confronting

adversity, therefore, represents peace and comfort. (Hachioji, Tokyo, January 27, 1996)

Today our Constitution guarantees the freedom of religious belief as a fundamental human right. The kind of persecutions experienced by the Daishonin and his followers in his time—in which those in power directly intervened in the activities and lives of practitioners—are therefore unlikely.

But the teaching of the Lotus Sutra — of the Daishonin’s Buddhism — is a teaching of absolute equality. It confidently asserts that all people, regardless of social rank, income, or fame, are equally worthy of respect from the standpoint of their inherent potential for Buddhahood. As we spread this teaching and our movement grows, it is bound to evoke resentment from those who despise such equality. It may cause fear or jealousy in those who teach or adhere to narrow beliefs.

Any opposition we face in these times and in this democratic society will more likely take the form of defamation in the media (including, today, on the internet) with the intent of creating public antipathy and distrust. This in turn could lead to pressure on individual practitioners at work and in their communities. In fact, attacks by unscrupulous writers and the media have been the most common approach used by those bearing enmity toward the Gakkai in Japan to create antagonism toward it for decades. In attempting to undermine the Soka Gakkai in Japan, Nichiren Shoshu under its current high priest, Nikken, has worked with such media. And outside of the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood under Nikken, such clear-cut opposition to our Buddhist movement has not occurred in the U.S.

For this reason, understanding the nature and motivations behind Nichiren Shoshu’s attacks on the SGI will help us understand the dynamics behind any possible future opposition or persecution. A deep look will tell us that they are motivated by a fundamental disdain for the spirit of equality that the Lotus Sutra and the Daishonin’s teachings stand for.

Nichigen-nyo’s spirit and practice can provide us with an inspiring example. She was proud to identify herself as a follower of the Daishonin, and we, too, can be proud to declare ourselves members of the SGI — the foremost gathering of people dedicated to the peace and happiness of humanity based on his teachings. And it is when we, like Nichigen-nyo, are determined to persevere strongly in the face of any opposition or difficulty, that we can derive true benefit from our Buddhist practice.

This was the spirit of the Soka Gakkai’s founder, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, who went to prison and died there because he was unwilling to compromise his convictions concerning Buddhism. It was the way of life of his disciple, Josei Toda, who went to prison with his mentor and emerged to create an unprecedented popular Buddhist movement after World War II. And it has consistently been the example set by SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, Mr. Toda’s disciple, who has persevered for more than fifty years to expand upon his mentor’s dream. Working tirelessly to spread this Buddhism and an awareness for peace throughout the world, he has faced a continual storm of opposition, jealousy and slander from those within the Japanese religious and political establishment; and for the past decade, from the priests of Nichiren Shoshu, the very Buddhist clergy he had devoted great energies to helping prosper. Struggling for the happiness of the people to the extent that it invites opposition; enduring and surmounting that opposition; and continuing to work for the happiness of the people — this is precisely the spirit and tradition of the Soka Gakkai. It is

the legacy of its successive presidents.

We might also bear in mind that Nichigen-nyo and her friend did not persevere in their faith simply to gain benefit, change their negative karma, and attain Buddhahood in this lifetime. Their actions were also intended to protect and support the Daishonin and to protect and spread Buddhism. They were actions that arose no doubt from a sense of selfless appreciation and devotion. In this sense, they were worthy of the highest respect.

And the role of women in today's SGI is no less worthy of respect. Regarding this, President Ikeda has said,

Obstacles and hardships are the material that let us forge genuine faith. We should actually be grateful when we have them.

The Soka Gakkai has advanced in accord with the teachings of the Lotus Sutra and the Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, fighting against the three obstacles and four devils. This is proof that ours is an organization truly dedicated to carrying out the widespread propagation of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. Those who are persecuted by the forces that would destroy the correct teaching of Buddhism are the genuine article.

Whenever the Soka Gakkai has encountered persecution, it has been the courage of the women's division members that has stood out. Their sincerity, strong faith and true grit mirror those of the courageous women who shine brightly in the pages of his writings. (Hachioji, Tokyo, October 22, 1998)

Though I am only guessing, it is as if a jewel had been placed in muddy water, and the water had become clear. ... Those in the land of Jambudvipa who believe in this sutra do so because of the power of Bodhisattva Universal Worthy.

Neither Nichigen-nyo nor her friend had mastered any sophisticated Buddhist theory, nor had they undergone any specialized training.

Why, then, in spite of this, were they able to persist with strong faith, unafraid of persecution? To explain, the Daishonin makes two analogies. The first, that of a jewel placed in muddy water making the water clear, reflects a common belief of the time; it expresses the power of the pure life-condition of Buddhahood. The second, that of learning something new from a wise person, believing in it, and thus grasping the truth, indicates that when we believe in a teaching that embodies wisdom, we too naturally gain the wisdom to judge things correctly in accord with Buddhist principles.

Nichigen-nyo and her friend were as if in muddy water, being largely unversed in their knowledge of Buddhist principles. Nevertheless, they had encountered the Daishonin, who was equivalent to a "jewel" in terms of his state of life; he was most certainly a "wise person." They learned from him and accepted his teaching, "believing every word," and thus stood up with strong faith as wise people themselves who had "thus grasped the truth."

"Shakyamuni Buddha and the bodhisattvas Universal Worthy, Medicine King, and Constellation King Flower" refer to figures appearing in various places throughout the Lotus Sutra, specifically the "Teacher of the Law" (10th) chapter, the "Medicine King" (23rd) chapter, and the "Universal Worthy" (28th) chapter. These chapters address the question of to whom the task of spreading the teaching of the Sutra after the Buddha's death will be entrusted. In the "Teacher of the Law" chapter, the Buddha tells Bodhisattva

Medicine king, regarding propagation after the Buddha's death:

Medicine King, you should know that after the Thus Come One has entered extinction, if there are those who can copy, uphold, read and recite this sutra, offer alms to it and expound it for others, then the Thus Come One will cover them with his robe, and they will also be protected and kept in mind by the Buddhas who are now present in other regions. (LS10, 164-5)

Also, in the "Medicine King" chapter, the Buddha addresses Bodhisattva Constellation King Flower: "After I have passed into extinction, in the last five hundred-year period you must spread it [the Lotus Sutra] abroad widely throughout Jambudvipa and never allow it to be cut off" (LS23, 288).

Then, the "Encouragements of the Bodhisattva Universal Worthy" chapter reads, "If when the Lotus Sutra is propagated throughout Jambudvipa there are those who accept and uphold it, they should think to themselves: This is all due to the authority and supernatural power of Universal Worthy!" (LS28, 321-22).

And "after the Thus Come One has entered extinction, I will cause it to be widely propagated throughout Jambudvipa and will see that it never comes to an end" (LS28, 322).

In other words, in the age after the Buddha's passing known as the Latter Day of the Law, those who uphold and spread the Lotus sutra are carrying out the function of the Bodhisattvas Medicine King, Constellation King Flower and Universal Worthy, and will assuredly receive the praise of all Buddhas. Through this passage, the Daishonin himself is praising Nichigen-nyo and her friend for their persevering faith and practice.

The Daishonin invokes the metaphor of various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas dwelling in their heart, and in this way he is pointing to the conditions of Buddha and Bodhisattva within Nichigen-nyo's and her friend's life. These are the states of wisdom, strength and compassion that she had been able to well forth by learning the correct teaching from the Daishonin and purely and honestly believing in that teaching. It was the women's sincerity and pure seeking spirit that the Daishonin alludes to when mentioning that Shakyamuni and these bodhisattvas are dwelling in their heart.

By this, the Daishonin is also implying that her life is expressing the functions of these Buddhas and bodhisattvas. And when one's life is manifesting the function of a Buddha or a bodhisattva, it is natural that one can bring forth the powerful life-force to stand up to any challenge, difficulty or even persecution, and come out a winner. □

1. William Cullen Bryant (1794–1878), U.S. poet, editor. Speech, 15 Dec. 1851.
2. Carl Jung (1875–1961), Swiss psychiatrist. *The Transcendent Function* (1916).
3. G. C. Lichtenberg (1742–99), German physicist, philosopher. Aphorisms, "Notebook K," aph. 48 (written 1765–99; tr. by R. J. Hollingdale, 1990).

BELIEVING IN THE CAUSALITY OF LIFE WITHIN: WHO ARE GODS SAME BIRTH AND SAME NAME?

In this letter, "The Gods Same Birth and Same Name," Nichiren Daishonin praises Nichigen-nyo's sincere, unseen support for her husband's visit to Sado Island where

the Daishonin was exiled. He concludes the letter by stating:

And yet, in such a turbulent world, and when you do not even have servants you can rely on, you have sent your husband here. This shows that your sincerity is deeper even than the earth, and the earthly gods must certainly realize it. It is loftier even than the sky, and the heavenly gods Brahma and Shakra must also be aware of it. The Buddha taught that one, from the very moment of one's birth, is accompanied by two messengers, Same Birth and Same Name, who are sent by heaven and who follow one as closely as one's own shadow, never parting from one even for an instant. These two take turns ascending to heaven to report one's offenses and good deeds, both great and small, without overlooking the slightest detail. Therefore, heaven too must know about this matter. How reassuring! How reassuring! (WND, 316)

The gods Same Birth and Same Name are alternately depicted in Buddhist scriptures as a god and goddess, or as one god. In either case, they are said record people's thoughts, words and deeds — good and bad — and remain with them at all times throughout life. The names of Same Birth and Same Name indicate that they come into existence at the time the person whom they accompany is born and carry the same name (i.e., identity) as that person. In other words, those deities are a metaphorical expression of the self.

The concept of the gods Same Birth and Same Name is almost analogous to the classical Western pagan belief in Genius, the tutelary god or attendant spirit assigned to all people at birth to govern their fortunes and determine their character, and finally to escort them out of the world.¹ Genius, which literally means "that which is just born,"² is sometimes depicted as two mutually opposed spirits — good and evil — whom every person is supposed to be attended by throughout life. In one sense, genius represents people's inner qualities that shape their whole personalities and determine the course of their lives. The Western concept of genius, therefore, is not far from the notion of the self as its counterpart Same Birth and Same Name in the East.

As we cannot separate the part of our self that creates an action from the part of our self that experiences the effect of that action, metaphorically speaking, the gods Same Birth and Same Name are always with us, aware of our every thought, word and deed. From the standpoint of Buddhism, this illustrates that our every thought, word and deed are recorded, so to speak, within our lives as karma — the Sanskrit word for action. And Buddhism explains that one's karma continues as one's fundamental identity throughout the eternal cycle of birth and death. Karma, in other words, is what makes us who we are. In this sense, the gods Same Birth and Same Name also signify the law of causality in life at work throughout one's past, present and future existences. As the saying goes, "What goes around comes around." We are accountable for our past actions, and, at the same time, we can shape our future in any way we please through our present actions.

1. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd Ed.
2. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. 3rd Ed.