

**STUDY MATERIAL FOR JUNE**  
**“THE HERITAGE OF THE ULTIMATE LAW OF LIFE”**  
**(THE WRITINGS OF NICHIREN DAISHONIN, P. 217;**  
**GOSHO ZENSHU, PP. 1337-38)**

The following is an excerpt from a letter Nichiren Daishonin wrote to one of his disciples in thirteenth-century Japan. It is taken from “The Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life” and is the study material for June study meetings in the SGI-USA.

All disciples and lay supporters of Nichiren should chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with the spirit of many in body but one in mind, transcending all differences among themselves<sup>1</sup> to become as inseparable as fish and the water in which they swim. This spiritual bond is the basis for the universal transmission of the ultimate Law of life and death. Herein lies the true goal of Nichiren’s propagation. When you are so united, even the great desire for widespread propagation can be fulfilled. But if any of Nichiren’s disciples disrupt the unity of many in body but one in mind, they would be like warriors who destroy their own castle from within.

Nichiren has been trying to awaken all the people of Japan to faith in the Lotus Sutra so that they too can share the heritage and attain Buddhahood. But instead they have persecuted me in various ways and finally had me banished to this island. You have followed Nichiren, however, and met with suffering as a result. It pains me deeply to think of your anguish. Gold can be neither burned by fire nor corroded or swept away by water, but iron is vulnerable to both. A worthy person is like gold, a fool like iron. You are like pure gold because you embrace the “gold” of the Lotus Sutra. The sutra states, “Just as among all the mountains, Mount Sumeru is foremost, so this Lotus Sutra is likewise.”<sup>2</sup> It also states, “The good fortune you gain thereby...cannot be burned by fire or washed away by water.”<sup>3</sup>

It must be ties of karma from the distant past that have destined you to become my disciple at a time like this. Shakyamuni and Many Treasures certainly realized this truth. The sutra’s statement, “Those persons who had heard the Law dwelled here and there in various Buddha lands, constantly reborn in company with their teachers,”<sup>4</sup> cannot be false in any way.

## **BACKGROUND**

Nichiren Daishonin sent this letter, dated the eleventh day of the second month in 1272,<sup>5</sup> to Sairen-bo Nichijo, a former priest of the Tendai school of Japanese Buddhism. The Daishonin had been living in exile on Sado Island since October 10, 1271, after government soldiers failed in their attempt to execute him on the beach at Tatsunokuchi. For reasons that are unclear, Sairen-bo was also living in exile on Sado Island. Details about Sairen-bo are scarce, but it is known that he was originally from Kyoto, and that he had studied at Mount Hiei, the seat of the Tendai School. He was also present at the Tsukahara Debate, held in front of Sammai-do, the Daishonin’s dwelling at Tsukahara, on the sixteenth and seventeenth days of the first month in 1272. In this debate the Daishonin was the clear victor over the Pure Land and True Word sects and other priests from Sado and various provinces of northern Japan. A number of people converted to his teachings at this

time, among them Sairen-bo.

Sairen-bo was a highly educated priest to whom the Daishonin sent several important essays, including “The True Aspect of All Phenomena” and “The Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life”. He had a number of unresolved questions about Buddhist theory, and he addressed them one by one to the Daishonin, who in turn answered these questions in written form. In this letter, the Daishonin praises him, saying, “How admirable that you have asked about the transmission of the ultimate Law of life and death!” In his answer the Daishonin offers a look into the wonder of the Buddha’s enlightenment, as well as the practical means whereby ordinary people may attain the same state of life.

## COMMENTARY

### The Transmission of Buddhism From Mentor to Disciple

The title, “The Heritage of the Ultimate of Life,” refers to the transmission of a Buddhist teaching from a Buddha to the people or from a mentor to a disciple. This transmission of Buddhism is often compared to a “bloodstream” that carries, without any impediment, the necessary nutrients to every cell of the human body. This “bloodstream” of Buddhism (Jpn *kechimyaku*) is often rendered as “heritage” or “lifeblood.” In Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, the Buddhist teaching to be transmitted to the people is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the Mystic Law. It is the underlying principle of both life and the universe. The Daishonin identifies this ultimate teaching as the core of Buddhism that was transmitted from the two Buddhas Shakyamuni and Many Treasures to Bodhisattva Superior Practices in the Lotus Sutra. In this letter, the Daishonin describes it as “the ultimate Law of life and death” (WND, 217).

The Daishonin teaches that our existences go through the two phases of life and death for all eternity and that these two aspects are the intrinsic function or rhythm of the cosmic life, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. When we awaken to the law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo within our lives, we can tap the great life force of Buddhahood within us and experience both life and death as sources of indestructible joy and happiness. On the other hand, if we remain ignorant of this essential working of our lives, the repeated cycle of life and death may become nothing but an unending source of suffering.

The Daishonin wished to transmit his teaching to all people so that they could free themselves from the sufferings of life and death. He states, “Nichiren has been trying to awaken all the people of Japan to faith in the Lotus Sutra so that they too can share the heritage and attain Buddhahood” (WND, 217). From the viewpoint of the Daishonin’s teaching, the purpose of the transmission of Buddhism lies in people’s happiness, and the content of the transmission is intended to be shared widely, rather than being accessible only to a privileged few.

### Faith as the Heritage of Buddhism

In “The Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life,” the Daishonin explains how we can share in the transmission of “the ultimate Law of life and death.” The life of a Buddha and the teaching of the Lotus Sutra, which reveal the direct path to Buddhahood, are not separate from the lives of the ordinary people (cf. WND, 216). The Daishonin urges us to believe that we all possess the life of a Buddha and that we intrinsically embody the ultimate teaching of Buddhism. This is why it is important to believe in our supreme potential when

we chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to the Gohonzon, which represents our innate Buddhahood. The Daishonin explains that this is the key to both receiving the transmission of the ultimate Buddhist teaching and manifesting it in our lives. In other words, the “lifeblood” or “heritage” of the Daishonin’s Buddhism is faith in the Gohonzon. More specifically, it is our belief that we all have the universal potential for Buddhahood.

The Daishonin stresses the importance of diligent and persevering practice. We must develop our faith and continue to practice “with the profound insight that now is the last moment of [our] life” (WND, 216). In other words, it is faith that enables us to receive the heritage of Buddhism; our practice is an expression of faith and at the same time a means to strengthen it. When we continue to strengthen our faith and practice, as if now were the last moment of our lives, we are certain to manifest the heritage of the Daishonin’s Buddhism.

### **Unity Is Key to the Transmission of Buddhism**

Our faith and practice form the basis of the transmission of Buddhism on an individual level. The Daishonin stresses that the unity of Buddhist practitioners is a key to the transmission of Buddhism on a societal level. He states: “All disciples and lay supporters of Nichiren should chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with the spirit of many in body, but one in mind, transcending all differences among themselves to become as inseparable as fish and the water in which they swim” (WND, 217).

We all have unique personalities and abilities, different functions and positions in society. While recognizing and appreciating those differences, it is important to create a sense of harmony among ourselves as people who share the same faith—faith that is directed toward and dedicated to the cause of all people’s happiness. The Daishonin explains that his teaching will spread through the unity illustrated by the principle “many in body but one in mind” (Jpn *itai doshin*).

Unity sometimes suggests the exclusion of those who do not follow certain prescribed rules or hold a fixed set of ideas. However, the concept of unity in the Daishonin’s Buddhism is different. It is unity built upon a shared commitment to embrace and respect all people for their innate Buddhahood. In the early history of Buddhism, the Buddhist Order consisted of people from all walks of life. Within the Order, however, social distinctions among practitioners were disregarded. The Order was called the “harmonious Order” (Skt *samagra-sangha*) since its members all sought the same goal of attaining enlightenment.

Faithful to this original spirit, the Daishonin stresses the importance of being “one in mind” while remaining “many in body.” The idea of “many in body” does not simply indicate a multitude of people. In the Japanese term for “many in body,” *i tai*, the character *i* can also mean “different.” In other words, “many” in this case implies diversity. The level at which we unite is not a superficial one—it has nothing to do with appearance, personal preferences, likes or dislikes. It is on the deepest level of the heart—a heart that desires and prays for both the improvement of self and the enrichment of others, society and humanity. The Daishonin suggests that in a group where Buddhists are united in their efforts to attain enlightenment and in working for the happiness of others, the true spirit and teaching of Buddhism comes alive. When each of us joins with the Daishonin’s heart and intent and practices for the spread of Buddhism, harmonious unity will naturally emerge among us. Furthermore, based on a mutual awareness our supreme potential for

Buddhahood, we naturally come to respect one another and appreciate our differences. The Daishonin explains that unity is key to transmitting and spreading the heritage of Buddhism.

### **Disunity Destroys Buddhism From Within**

In this letter, the Daishonin admonishes: “If any of Nichiren’s disciples disrupt the unity of many in body but one in mind, they would be like warriors who destroy their own castle from within” (WND, 217). Disrupting the unity of “many in body but one in mind” refers to actions that are contrary to our mutual goal of propagating the Daishonin’s Buddhism. The unity of the Daishonin’s disciples hinges upon their efforts for people’s happiness and for the betterment of society based on the humane ideals of Buddhism. Any attempt to undermine the importance of such efforts, or to demean those who are making such efforts, leads to disunity within the Buddhist Order.

Here it is important to distinguish disunity from expressions of diversity. In any group, differing personalities and opinions can be a plus, so long as their expressions are grounded in mutual respect. Enforced sameness with no mutual appreciation or respect cannot be called unity. Among Buddhists, when we see our differences from the profound commonality of Buddhahood, they are transformed into very positive influences. Then the uniqueness of each person and the rich diversity of our movement become a force for the spread of Buddhism and people’s happiness. Disunity among the Daishonin’s followers fundamentally stems from denying the universality of Buddhahood and subordinating “the true goal of Nichiren’s propagation” (WND, 217) to selfish desires. In this sense, any attempt to make fundamental distinctions among practitioners or disregard their genuine efforts to spread the Daishonin’s Buddhism amounts to the act of destroying the “castle” of Buddhism from within.

### **Polishing One’s Life Through Hardship**

Sairen-bo seems to have gone through considerable hardship on account of his faith in the Daishonin’s Buddhism. The exact nature of his difficulties is not known from the letter’s text, but judging from the Daishonin’s praise for him it is clear that Sairen-bo persevered in challenging them. The Daishonin encourages his disciple: “You are like pure gold because you embrace the ‘gold’ of the Lotus Sutra” (WND, 217). The Daishonin teaches us how we can overcome our hardships and even develop our character as we grapple with them.

“The gold of the Lotus Sutra” may be interpreted as the truth expounded in the Lotus Sutra—the universality of Buddhahood. Foolish people, when faced with an obstacle, allow fear and confusion to erode their self-confidence, bringing defeat upon themselves. Foolishness in this sense means ignorance of the real value and power of one’s life. According to the Daishonin, “a worthy person” is someone who does not forget what is truly important in his or her life when facing an obstacle. No matter how dismal our circumstances may appear, as long as we are confident that we possess the “gold of the Lotus Sutra,” that is, the Buddha nature within us, any obstacle will serve only as an opportunity to bring out the “gold” of Buddhahood from within. Each obstacle we face in the course of living then becomes a training ground for increasing our inner strength and

honing our character.

Those who believe in the Mystic Law are supremely worthy because they possess the key to transforming the sufferings of life and death into unsurpassed joy and happiness. As they experience the vicissitudes of life, they not only enjoy themselves, but their lives shine ever more brightly, like “pure gold.”

### **The Eternal Bond of Mentor and Disciple**

The Daishonin also encourages Sairen-bo by explaining that the bond between them is a deep karmic relationship. In other words, encountering each other was not merely a matter of chance, but was the effect of a deep causal relation from the past. The Daishonin quotes the Lotus Sutra: “Those persons who had heard the Law dwelled here and there in various Buddha lands, constantly reborn in company with their teachers.” A Buddha land is not necessarily a land of perfect bliss; it is a land where a Buddha dwells and, through his teaching, leads the inhabitants there to happiness. So those who share the spirit and intent of a Buddha, and are dedicated to the spread of Buddhism, are making causes to be reborn with their teacher in future existences. The bond between mentor and disciple is eternal in this sense, but it can be strengthened or severed by the action of a disciple in the present existence. In other words, what is most important is a disciple’s resolve to share the mentor’s heart or intent and strive to achieve their shared goal.

The Daishonin saw Sairen-bo’s determination to struggle alongside him with strong faith and despite many difficulties. Although Sado Island appeared to be nothing like a Buddha land, for the Daishonin and Sairen-bo it was precisely that. It was the place where mentor and disciple strove together in harmony for the sake of Buddhism. The foundation of the bond between mentor and disciple in Buddhism lies in their shared goal of spreading Buddhism and leading all people to happiness. Therefore, the mentor-disciple relationship becomes synonymous with the transmission of the heritage of Buddhism. When disciples share their mentor’s resolve for the propagation of the Law, the heritage of the Buddhist teaching flows freely in their lives and becomes manifest. In this sense, the mentor-disciple relationship is the foundation of the transmission of Buddhism.

One reason why the Daishonin discusses the issue of heritage and the mentor-disciple relationship was that the existing traditions of medieval Buddhism concerning these concepts were quite misleading. During the Daishonin’s time, the transmission of Buddhism, especially in the esoteric Tendai School, was shrouded in an atmosphere of secrecy. The content of the transmission was often kept from ordinary people, and priests sometimes used a method called oral transmission to maintain this secrecy. The transmission of lineage in some of the other Buddhist schools depended on quasi-legal transfer documents. Schisms within a Buddhist school often took place as a result of a dispute over the legitimacy or meaning of such transfer documents. During the time of the Daishonin, the transmission of Buddhism tended to resemble the secular legal transfer of family properties while at the same time becoming increasingly esoteric and secretive.

In this letter, by clearly defining “heritage” in terms of faith, the Daishonin makes it clear that the transmission of Buddhism depends neither on documents nor secret oral traditions. He also clarifies that a secret appointment or document does not define the relationship between mentor and disciple. The Daishonin boldly challenges the corrupt Buddhist establishment of his day by declaring that those of genuine faith and practice possess the true heritage of Buddhism and that the relationship between mentor and

disciple rests upon their shared commitment to the humanistic ideals of Buddhism. It was revolutionary that the Daishonin attempted to share with all people what was traditionally viewed as the secret heritage of Buddhism. As his disciples, it is our task to continue to spread his teaching of openness and freedom while fighting any attempt to cloak the Daishonin's Buddhism in secrets or mysticism. To do this is to receive the heritage. □

By the SGI-USA Study Department

1. The phrase “transcending all differences among themselves” could be rendered literally as “without any thought of self or other, this or that.” This is not a denial of individuality, but rather urges the bridging of gaps among people that arise from self-centeredness.
2. Lotus Sutra, chap. 23.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., chap. 7.
5. Based on Medieval Japan's interpretation of the Chinese lunar calendar.