

## **BUDDHIST CONCEPT FOR TODAY'S LIVING (21) GOOD FRIENDS AND BAD FRIENDS**

In the Buddhist concept of what constitutes a good or bad friend, a good friend is one who leads people to the correct teaching. These are honest people who guide others to faith in the Gohonzon. Conversely, an evil friend is one who deceives and causes people to fall into the evil paths, into suffering. An evil friend deludes others with false doctrines in order to obstruct their Buddhist practice.

Regarding the importance of having good friends in our Buddhist practice, Nichiren Daishonin states: "When a tree has been transplanted, though fierce winds may blow, it will not topple if it has a firm stake to hold it up. But even a tree that has grown up in place may fall over if its roots are weak. Even a feeble person will not stumble if those supporting him are strong, but a person of considerable strength, when alone, may fall down on an uneven path" ("Three Tripitaka Masters Pray for Rain," WND, 598).

The human mind is easily swayed by environmental influences. That is why it is valuable to associate with good friends who support our practice to attain Buddhahood.

Buddhism explains this age of the Latter Day of the Law as a time filled with people who oppose the heart of the Lotus Sutra, an age where views and teachings that run counter to life's inherent dignity prevail. In this regard Nichiren Daishonin quotes the Nirvana Sutra, "Bodhisattvas, have no fear of mad elephants. What you should fear are evil friends! ...Even if you are killed by a mad elephant, you will not fall into the three evil paths. But if you are killed by an evil friend, you are certain to fall into them" ("On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land," WND, 11).

In modern terms, the tragedy of a traffic accident might be equated with a stampede of mad elephants. But should Buddhist practitioners die in a traffic accident, or through some other sudden cause, they will certainly not be led into the three evil paths of hell, hunger or animality. The Daishonin strictly cautions us that one who dies with incorrect faith as the result of influence from "evil friends," will surely fall into the three evil paths in future existences. The essential point here is that we seek out good friends.

Buddhism describes this time as a defiled age. It is at such a time, when we are surrounded by the influence of so many evil friends, that we require the wisdom to perceive who they are. We must develop the strength of faith to continually improve ourselves to guide even evil friends to the correct teachings.

In this regard, Nichiren Daishonin states: "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" ("The Actions of the Votary of the Lotus Sutra," WND, 770). Devadatta was once Shakyamuni's disciple but because of arrogance, he later backslid in faith and betrayed his mentor. He then went about creating his own following, misleading some of the disciples of Shakyamuni and thereby disrupting the harmonious association of Buddhist practitioners. He even went so far as to conspire with Ajatashatru, the king of Magadha (a large state in ancient India), to do away with the Buddha. However, it was through Devadatta's treachery in persecuting Shakyamuni and the Buddha's tremendous victory in widely spreading Buddhism, while enduring and defeating such evil, that Shakyamuni was able to prove the greatness of his teaching. The power of Buddhism is such that even people of evil influence can function to prove its validity and become "good friends."

The Daishonin further states: “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). As the Daishonin indicates here, it is our strong opponents that can act as good friends, making it possible to strengthen our weaknesses, improve our character and prove the power of faith. In this writing, the Daishonin refers to Ryokan, a priest of the True Word Precepts school, who was at that time regarded as a sage. In truth, he was a powerful enemy, obstructing the propagation of the Mystic Law. Using his status and position, he colluded with government authorities in persecuting the Daishonin and his disciples. He was also instrumental in causing the Daishonin’s near-execution at Tatsunokuchi Beach. From the standpoint of Buddhism, Ryokan was indeed an evil person. Nonetheless, the Daishonin lists him among those who, because of their powerful opposition, made it possible to prove himself to be the votary of the Lotus Sutra. We can see through the Daishonin’s own example that we can cause every influence in our lives to work for us, like a good friend when we devote ourselves to Buddhist practice.

In the course of our practice, we may encounter the type of evil friends that hold the potential to sway us from the correct path in life. However, through continuous devotion to faith, practice, and study, we will definitely not be swayed and can turn any negative influences into profound causes for happiness for ourselves and others.

We embrace the Gohonzon that Nichiren Daishonin inscribed for the happiness of all humanity. We also have the SGI organization which is itself a gathering of good friends — of fellow Bodhisattvas of the Earth — who inspire and encourage one another in the correct practice of the Daishonin’s Buddhism. What great good fortune we possess. The whole purpose of our Buddhist practice is to establish an invincible self, impervious to any negative influence, like the beautiful lotus flower that emerges from and is nourished by a muddy swamp. Filled with joy, purity, self identity and creativity, we are able to dynamically turn even evil friends into good ones — into sources of growth and happiness.

*By Mark Koral, based on Yasashi Kyogaku (Easy Buddhist Study).*