

The Brilliant Light of Humanistic Philosophy (6)

Pursue the Great Path of Mentor and Disciple, Regarding Hardships as a Badge of Honour

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Hi, my name is Antonio Choi. This month, we are studying the sixth instalment of the series *The Brilliant Light of Humanistic Philosophy*, titled “Pursue the Great Path of Mentor and Disciple, Regarding Hardships as a Badge of Honour.” As noted in the introduction to this article, this installment reprints excerpts from Ikeda Sensei’s Goshō lecture on “Letter to the Brothers.”

This letter was written to encourage the Ikegami brothers, who were disowned by their father for their faith and struck by severe obstacles. Referring to these passages, President Ikeda reveals that overcoming difficulties will lead to transforming one’s karma and expresses his hope for the victory of the disciples.

President Ikeda opens his lecture by citing Mr. Toda’s comparison of a mountain climb to describe attaining Buddhahood, and says:

He was teaching them in a readily accessible way that the true benefit of faith is attaining an unshakable state of absolute happiness, and that in order to reach the highest summit of Buddhahood, they must press onward through the valleys of training and development, which are all ultimately part of our Buddhist practice.

As we traverse these valleys on the way to ascending the highest summit, various obstacles will emerge to hinder our progress. Yet without passing through valleys and climbing up steep inclines, we cannot reach the top. The appearance of the three obstacles and four devils serve to show that we are on the correct path of Buddhist practice.

In “Letter to the Brothers,” the Daishōnin discusses why the practitioners of the Lotus Sutra encounter hardships from three perspectives. First, hardships can arise due to the workings of the devil king of the sixth heaven, who influences those around us and hinders our progress. Second, hardships can stem from our own karma from past lifetimes. However, when we encounter difficulties because of our Buddhist practice, they actually help lessen

our karmic retribution. And third, hardships can also be seen as the heavenly deities testing the strength of our faith.

Now, let's read the first Gosho passage President Ikeda has selected, which relates to this second point.

Both of you have continued believing in the Lotus Sutra; thus you are now [bringing forth retribution and thereby] ridding yourselves of your grave offences from the past. For example, the flaws in iron come to the surface when it is forged. Put into flames, a rock simply turns to ashes, but gold becomes pure gold. (WND-1, 497)

The Daishonin teaches to the brothers that, through the benefit of practising the Lotus Sutra, they are drawing forth retribution for past grave offenses of slandering the Law. In this light, hardships take on a deeper meaning. They become opportunities to forge and deepen their faith and inner state of life. President Ikeda comments:

The process of confronting and challenging our karma enables us to polish and strengthen our faith. It is when we are tested by the fires of karma that we can show our true mettle. If we are irresolute, we will be like ash and crumble, but if we maintain a firm resolve, we will become pure gold, our lives growing ever more radiant.

President Ikeda also offers encouragement to those who may be practising alone or without the support or understanding of their families, similar to the Ikegami brothers. He says,

There is no need to fret or be impatient, or to try to force Buddhism on them. As long as just one person. As long as just one person in a family is practising sincerely, then the whole family is assured of enjoying lasting success and prosperity through that one person's pervasive influence.

Through unity and perseverance in faith, the Ikegami brothers overcame being disowned twice and eventually led their father to the Daishonin's Buddhism. As the Daishonin praises them, their victory remains a source of immeasurable hope for all of us today.

Let's now read the second Goshō selection.

The Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai's *Great Concentration and Insight* is the essence of his lifetime teachings and the heart of the whole spectrum of the Buddha's sacred teachings. . .

The doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life revealed in the fifth volume of *Great Concentration and Insight* is especially profound. If you propagate it, devils will arise without fail. If they did not, there would be no way of knowing that this is the correct teaching. One passage from the same volume reads: "As practice progresses and understanding grows, the three obstacles and four devils emerge in confusing form, vying with one another to interfere. . . One should be neither influenced nor frightened by them. If one falls under their influence, one will be led into the paths of evil. If one is frightened by them, one will be prevented from practicing the correct teaching." This statement not only applies to me [Nichiren], but also is a guide for my followers. Reverently make this teaching your own, and transmit it as an axiom of faith for future generations. (WND-1, 500–01)

In this letter, the Daishonin explains, from various perspectives, why hardships arise for those who uphold the Lotus Sutra. He concludes by emphasizing that faith is a struggle against the "three obstacles and four devils, citing a passage from *The Great Concentration and Insight*. The phrase "as practice progresses and understanding grows" indicates a stage where practitioners have deepened their understanding of the Lotus Sutra and solidified their practice. The three obstacles and four devils arise precisely because of these sincere efforts to transform one's life at the most fundamental level. In our own lives, this means that such obstacles appear when we exert ourselves wholeheartedly in both practice and study, and move forward in our efforts for kosen-rufu.

The Daishonin further asserts that the three obstacles and four devils arise when we are on the verge of attaining Buddhahood. T'ien-t'ai outlines two key ingredients for faith in confronting them: (1) "not being influenced by them" and (2) "not being frightened by them." And often, we may not even realize that we are being influenced by the three obstacles and four devils. President Ikeda teaches us:

[W]isdom and courage are the foundation for victory in this struggle—the wisdom to see devilish functions for what they are and not be swayed by them, and the courage to stand up to them without fear. The practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is the source of the wisdom and courage needed to defeat such negative forces.

Towards the end, Ikeda Sensei quotes Mr. Toda:

To soar serenely in the skies of attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime, we must launch headlong into the fierce winds of adversity. Faith that remains undefeated by any hardship is what enables us to build a palace of eternal happiness in our lives. There is no obstacle that we cannot surmount with faith.

Ikeda Sensei concludes with these words:

Faith is of utmost importance. In another letter, the Daishonin tells the Ikegami brothers: “The three obstacles and four devils will invariably appear, and the wise will rejoice while the foolish will retreat” (WND-1, 637).” When our faith is that of “the wise who rejoice,” the fierce winds of the three obstacles and four devils will only serve to disperse the clouds of karma that hang over us.

At your study meetings, it would be wonderful to share your experiences related to the three obstacles and four devils, such as how you recognized and overcame the devilish functions, how you’ve encouraged others facing hardships, or how you yourself were encouraged while going through a difficult period.

The second SGI Canada Introductory Study Exam, which will be held this year on Sunday, October 25. For more details, please have a look at the announcement in the June issue of New Century. If you haven't taken an SGI Canada study exam before, I hope you take this opportunity to experience the great joy of studying Nichiren Buddhism. Engaging in Buddhist study is a wonderful way to expand our life state and deepen our faith and practice. And for those of you who have already passed the Introductory Exam, I hope you’ll reach out and support those who are preparing to take on the challenge this year.

Thank you for listening to the June podcast. If you have any questions, please send your question to study@sgicanada.org .