

Session 8 - April

Chapter 3: Faith and Practice

3. Faith for Overcoming Obstacles

Life is invariably accompanied by difficulties. And in our struggles for kosen-rufu, we are sure to encounter hardships and obstacles. In this section, we explore the various kinds of obstacles and hindrances that will arise in the process of carrying out our Buddhist practice, and affirm the significance of “faith for overcoming obstacles.”

Because our aim is to attain Buddhahood in this lifetime, it is important that we maintain our Buddhist faith and practice throughout our lives. However, Buddhism teaches that as we continue to persevere in our practice, obstacles and difficulties will arise without fail to obstruct us. It is crucial, then, that we be prepared for these, and strive to establish faith that cannot be compromised by any problem or adversity.

Why is it, then, that a person who upholds the correct teaching encounters obstacles?

First, it is because to believe in and practice the correct teaching with the aim of developing the life state of Buddhahood means transforming one’s life at the deepest level. And while any change or reformation will be met with some resistance, Buddhist practice in particular arouses strong opposition to change from within our own lives or our relationships with others. This may be compared to the way the resistance of the water on the hull of a moving boat produces waves.

The hindrances that arise as we practice Buddhism for the purpose of attaining enlightenment are often categorized as the “three obstacles and four devils.” In addition to these, the Lotus Sutra teaches that a “votary of the Lotus Sutra,” a person who correctly practices and endeavors to spread its teaching in the evil and impure age of the Latter Day of the Law, will encounter opposition by forces known as the “three powerful enemies.”

These represent the persecutions that occur wherever there are those who, in the evil age after the passing of Shakyamuni Buddha, actively practice the Lotus Sutra and work to spread it widely with the wish of enabling all people to attain Buddhahood. Persecution by the three powerful enemies can be proof that one is a genuine votary or practitioner of the Lotus Sutra.

1) The Three Obstacles and Four Devils

In his work “Letter to the Brothers,” Nichiren Daishonin writes:

One passage from the same volume [the fifth volume of T’ien-t’ai’s *Great Concentration and Insight*] 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, 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, 501)

As this passage teaches, when we believe in and practice the correct Buddhist teaching, and advance in our Buddhist practice while deepening our faith, functions will arise to obstruct our progress. These are known as the three obstacles and four devils.

In the same work, the Daishonin explains the elements of the three obstacles and four devils in some detail as follows:

The three obstacles in this passage are the obstacle of earthly desires, the obstacle of karma, and the obstacle of retribution. The obstacle of earthly desires is the impediments to one’s practice that arise from greed, anger, foolishness, and the like; the obstacle of karma is the hindrances presented by one’s wife or children; and the obstacle of retribution is the hindrances caused by one’s sovereign or parents. Of the four devils, the workings of the devil king of the sixth heaven are of this last kind. (WND-1, 501)

The Three Obstacles

First, in the “three obstacles,” the word *obstacles* indicates functions that hinder us in our faith and practice. These are categorized as the obstacle of earthly desires, the obstacle of karma, and the obstacle of retribution.

The obstacle of earthly desires indicates when earthly desires, or impulses and afflictions, such as greed, anger, and foolishness (called the “three poisons”), prevent us from progressing in Buddhist faith and practice.

The obstacle of karma refers to hindrances to our faith and practice that result from our evil acts in this life. In this passage from “Letter to the Brothers,” opposition from those close to one, such as one’s spouse or children, is cited as a specific

example.

The obstacle of retribution describes impediments to our Buddhist practice that are due to the difficult circumstances into which we are born or have come to live. These are considered adverse rewards or reckoning that stem from bad karma formed in past lifetimes. In “Letter to the Brothers,” the Daishonin associates these with opposition coming from people whose wishes one is bound to follow, such as the sovereign of one’s nation and one’s parents.

The Four Devils

Next, the word *devil* of the “four devils” refers to workings within the hearts and minds of those who believe in and practice Buddhism. These workings hinder or take away the brilliance of their lives, which are in themselves embodiments of the Mystic Law. The four devils are (1) the hindrance of the five components,¹ (2) the hindrance of earthly desires, (3) the hindrance of death, and (4) the hindrance of the devil king.

The hindrance of the five components arises from disharmony among the workings of the body and mind, or the five components, of those who carry out faith and practice.

The hindrance of earthly desires means the emergence within one’s life of afflictions such as greed, anger, and foolishness that function to destroy one’s faith.

The hindrance of death comes when a person’s Buddhist practice is cut short due to his or her death. Also, it can be said that one has been defeated by the hindrance or devil of death when the death of another practitioner, or of anyone close, causes one to doubt one’s Buddhist faith.

Finally, there is the hindrance of the devil king. “Devil king” is an abbreviation of the Devil King of the Heaven of Freely Enjoying Things Conjured by Others—the king who makes free use of the fruits of others’ efforts for his own pleasure. Also known as the devil king of the sixth heaven, this is the most fundamental kind of devilish function described in Buddhism.

Nichiren Daishonin says that “the fundamental darkness manifests itself as the devil king of the sixth heaven” (WND-1, 1113). He means that this devilish function is something that emerges from the fundamental delusion innate in life itself. It reveals itself in different forms and utilizes various means to persecute and oppress those who are practicing Buddhism correctly. Most typically, it appears in the lives of those in

¹ The five components: The constituent elements of form, perception, conception, volition, and consciousness that unite temporarily to form an individual living being.

power or who have strong influence over practitioners.

The Wise Will Rejoice While the Foolish Will Retreat

It is clear, then, that as we endeavor to carry out our Buddhist practice, obstacles and hardships will emerge to hinder our progress. However, it is important to be aware that earthly desires such as greed, anger, and foolishness, spouses and partners, children, parents, our own body and mind, or even death do not in themselves constitute obstacles and devils. Rather, what causes them to function as the three obstacles and four devils is the weakness of our own life force that allows us to be influenced negatively by them.

Even Shakyamuni Buddha was able to attain enlightenment through clearly recognizing that the various illusions arising within his own mind were devilish functions trying to prevent him from achieving his goal. For us, the key to defeating devilish functions is to develop faith that is strong enough to remain unshaken by anything.

In this regard, Nichiren Daishonin states:

There is definitely something extraordinary in the ebb and flow of the tide, the rising and setting of the moon, and the way in which summer, autumn, winter, and spring give way to each other. Something uncommon also occurs when an ordinary person attains Buddhahood. At such a time, the three obstacles and four devils will invariably appear, and the wise will rejoice while the foolish will retreat. (WND-1, 637)

When the three obstacles and four devils appear, it is crucial to have the conviction that this is the very time for us to make great progress toward attaining Buddhahood and, as wise people who rejoice at such challenges, persevere in our faith and overcome them.

2) The Three Powerful Enemies

The “Encouraging Devotion” (13th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra describes in its twenty-line verse section the three kinds of powerful opponents who will persecute those who strive to spread the sutra’s teachings in the Latter Day of the Law. Known as the “three powerful enemies,” they are defined as (1) arrogant lay people, (2) arrogant monks, and (3) arrogant false sages.

All are described as arrogant because they display various kinds of haughtiness and conceit, believing themselves superior to or greater than other people.

(1) “Arrogant lay people” are those ignorant of Buddhism who persecute practitioners of the Lotus Sutra. The sutra explains that they will subject the sutra’s practitioners to slander, cursing and speaking ill of them, or even attacking them with weapons such as swords and staves.

(2) “Arrogant monks” are Buddhist clergy who slander the Lotus Sutra’s practitioners. Because their understanding is flawed and their hearts crooked, they fail to understand the truth of the Buddhist teachings. And yet, attached to their own ways of thinking and believing themselves superior to others, they harass and persecute those who uphold the correct teaching.

(3) “Arrogant false sages” are seemingly respectable monks or priests whom people regard as sages. Typically, they reside in places removed from society. Consumed with greed and the desire for profit, they harbor ill will and contrive to undermine or deceive practitioners of the Lotus Sutra. Their usual tactic is to approach the ruler, senior officials, or others in authority and make false claims about the practitioners, such as declaring them to be persons of mistaken views, in an attempt to motivate those in power to oppress them.

The Lotus Sutra describes the condition in which a person’s heart or mind falls under the influence of such evil with the statement “Evil demons will take possession of others” (LSOC13, 233). It teaches that, in the Latter Day of the Law, those who practice the sutra will be repeatedly assailed and driven off by those who have succumbed to evil impulses.

Of these three powerful enemies, it is said that, though one may be able to endure the first and the second, the third is the most formidable and pernicious. The reason is that it is quite difficult to perceive and recognize the true nature of such esteemed religious figures of high status—arrogant false sages.

In the Latter Day of the Law, whenever there are those who spread the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, these three powerful enemies will appear and attempt to interfere and obstruct such efforts. Because of his efforts to spread the Lotus Sutra, Nichiren Daishonin faced persecutions brought about by these three powerful enemies just as the sutra predicts, thus proving that he was the votary of the Lotus Sutra in the Latter Day.

[To be continued]