

Earthly Desires Are Enlightenment (*Bonnō soku bodai*)

As common mortals, we live with various hardships and suffering. Basically, there is no one who lives a life devoid of hardships and suffering. For some people, such tribulations become causes for illnesses. However, they also function as the driving force to enable us to live productive lives.

Buddhism expounds that the causes for hardships and suffering are earthly desires. By contrast, the peaceful and tranquil life condition that we can experience after we conquer our hardships and suffering through correctly upholding our Buddhist practice is none other than enlightenment. Our approach to things and the nature of our lives will be vastly different, depending on whether we consider earthly desires and enlightenment to be completely distinct and separate, or whether we consider them to be a unified entity.

In the Gosho, *On the Meaning of the True Entity of Myoho-Renge-Kyo* (Tōtaigi-shō), Nichiren Daishonin states:

Those who honestly discard the expedient teachings, put faith only in the Lotus Sutra, and chant Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo, will transform the three paths of earthly desires, karma, and suffering into the three virtues of the property of the Law, wisdom, and emancipation. The threefold contemplation and the three truths will immediately manifest in their minds, and the place where they dwell will become the land of eternally tranquil light.

(*Gosho*, p. 694)

Let us study about this Gosho passage this month.

Buddhism teaches the principle of the three paths (*sandō*) of earthly desires, karma, and suffering. Earthly desires, here, refer to the desires and distractions in the lives of the general populace. They also represent all delusions, such as greed, anger, stupidity, arrogance, and doubt, which work to hinder our Buddhist practice and prevent us from attaining enlightenment. Individuals agonize and suffer as a result of their various desires.

For example, if people focus their actions only to profit themselves, they eventually will be isolated from their families and society. If the focus of their business is solely their own profit, then their clients will gradually leave. In this way,

in modern times, there are extremely large numbers of people who only care about their own gain.

In our Buddhist practice, it is important for us not to be satisfied only by our own profits and gratification. For example, making sincere Gokuyō offerings is an integral part of our practice. There is a parable about the “Single Flame of a Poor Woman” in the Sutra of the Prophecy of Buddhahood for King Ajatashatru (*Ajase-ō juketsu-kyō*):

At one time, King Ajatashatru invited Shakyamuni Buddha to come and present a sermon. Shakyamuni gave his sermon and was on his way to return to the Jetavana Monastery. The king arranged for numerous flax oil lamps to light the Buddha’s way at essential locations. A poor old woman wanted to present an offering of light to the Buddha. She went through a great deal of difficulty to raise a little money to purchase flax oil, and she was able to make an offering of light. After some time passed, most of the flames of the lamps offered by King Ajatashatru grew dim or went out. Meanwhile, although the old woman’s lamp contained only a little oil, her flame, alone, intensified in brightness and continued to burn.

This parable illustrates how the benefits of the sincere offering of the destitute old woman were much greater than those of the huge offering presented by the king, who lived a life of comfort and luxury. Thus, great benefits will result for those who are unselfish and pure and sincere in their offerings. Humans, however, are inherently greedy and do not know when they have an adequate amount. As a result, their hardships and suffering are profound and intense.

The next element, karma, represents the functions of the three categories of action—thoughts, words, and deeds—which arise from earthly desires. Sometimes, we may increase our suffering through our own physical, verbal, and mental actions.

An example of this is the rude behavior that we may display to others. If we use abusive language, flattery, or insults and if we are arrogant or resentful toward others in our hearts, we will accumulate negative karma, which will cause hardships and suffering in our lives.

Finally, suffering refers to the four sufferings and the eight sufferings. The four sufferings are birth, aging, sickness, and death. As common mortals, we cannot escape the suffering of these realities of life.

The three virtues (*santoku*) are the property of the Law, wisdom, and emancipation. They portray the virtues of the Buddha from three perspectives. The property of the Law refers to the entity of the Buddha—the ultimate truth grasped by the Buddha. Wisdom is the sagely perception of the Buddha, enabling him to accurately understand the true nature of all things. And emancipation describes the virtue of the Buddha that enables him to sever the chains of all earthly desires and to escape the suffering of birth and death.

Nichiren Daishonin states the following in the Gosho, *On the Meaning of the True Entity of Myoho-Renge-Kyo*:

Those who honestly discard the expedient teachings, put faith only in the Lotus Sutra, and chant Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo, will transform the three paths of earthly desires, karma, and suffering into the three virtues of the property of the Law, wisdom, and emancipation. The threefold contemplation and the three truths will immediately manifest in their minds, and the place where they dwell will become the land of eternally tranquil light.

(*Gosho*, p. 694)

Thus, by sincerely embracing the Gohonzon of the Three Great Secret Laws and chanting Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo, we can achieve the benefits of the principle of “the three paths are in themselves the three virtues” (*sandō souk santoku*). Furthermore, Nichiren Daishonin writes the following in the Gosho, *Reply to Shijō Kingo* (Shijō kingo dono-gohenji):

Look upon suffering as suffering and understand joy to be joy. Regard both suffering and joy as what they are and continue chanting Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo. This is indeed the state of boundless joy from the Law.

(*Gosho*, p. 991)

There is a proverb in Japan: “Failure is the mother of success.” Pain and distress accompany failure. However, that failure can be put to good use to bring about success in the future. In other words, success is possible only because there is failure and, in the same way, hardships bring about meaning to happiness and comfort.

If our daily lives were only a series of happy days, we never would appreciate happiness. In reality, we can truly recognize and cherish happiness only after experiencing hardships and suffering. In other words, the seed of happiness is contained within hardships.

We must chant Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo with absolute faith in the Gohonzon and assiduously uphold the practice for ourselves and for others. Only then can we accept the realities of suffering and happiness for what they are, and achieve a state of life in peace and tranquility in which we are neither influenced by hardships nor happiness. This absolute life state of the Buddha, in which he remains uninfluenced by hardships and happiness, is called “boundless joy from the Law” (*jiju hōraku*).

At the source of the suffering that many people experience from various forms of earthly desires is their lack of wisdom, which prevents them from understanding the truth.

Buddhism expounds the principle of the three truths (*santai*)—the truth of emptiness, temporary existence, and the middle way. In order to explain the three truths, let's use the example of a car. A car is composed of numerous parts, such as tires, a steering wheel, and doors. If we remove these parts, one after another, and disassemble it completely, that car, itself, will no longer exist. In this way, all forms of existence in this world ultimately do not possess distinctly fixed entities. This is the concept of emptiness (*kū*).

When the parts are reassembled and, as a result of this action, a car now exists, this state is called temporary existence (*ke*).

The state of things in real can be not temporary existence but emptiness, while it can be not emptiness but temporary existence. The truth of the middle way (*chū*) is the principle that is neither inclined to one or the other, and is able to cover the entirety of both. When the three states of emptiness, temporary existence, and the middle way associate with one another and unite as one, they form the threefold truth (*en'yū-no-santai*). This principle represents the true nature of all phenomena.

Since we are unable to observe the essence of the three truths, we experience hardships and suffering. In particular, we are frequently captivated by matters of temporary existence before our eyes. Due to these earthly desires, we consequently suffer.

The threefold contemplation in a single mind (*isshin sangan*) is the practice of meditation observing the true principle of the three truths of emptiness, temporary existence, and the middle way. This form of practice is from the Middle Day of the Law. We, in the Latter Day of the Law, cannot practice it. Fortunately, however, we can chant Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo to the Gohonzon, which inherently possesses the entirety of the Three Great Secret Laws. By so doing without any distractions, the benefits of practicing the threefold contemplation in a single mind will naturally be manifested in us, enabling us to achieve the peaceful life condition of enlightenment in our present form.

Then, the Buddha nature within each of us will be roused, and the three paths of earthly desires, karma, and suffering will be transformed into the three virtues of the property of the Law, wisdom, and emancipation, and we will be able to achieve a peaceful and tranquil life condition.

Simply put, just like suffering is the seed to happiness, earthly desires are the source of enlightenment. Through the benefits of chanting Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo, we are able to transform our various hardships and suffering into lives of true enrichment and fulfillment. The path that will enable us to truly overcome all suffering is none other than upholding faith and practice without ever slackening in the true Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin.

Sixty-eighth High Priest Nichinyo Shonin gave us the following guidance:

Everyone possesses earthly desires, karma, and suffering. Conversely, this means that we all inherently possess the essential cause for enlightenment. Therefore, the power of Daimoku is truly great. The

three paths of earthly desires, karma, and suffering, which are the basic causes of evil within us, can be transformed into the three virtues of the property of the Law, wisdom, and emancipation, which are the virtues of the Buddha. Herein lies the significance of the principle, “the three paths are in themselves the three virtues.”

(Dainichiren, No. 845, p. 34)

Since people in society are unaware of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, they are constantly plagued by earthly desires, karma, and suffering. Fortunately for us, we have been able to encounter the true Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin, which enables us to transform hardships and suffering into a life condition of peace and tranquility. Out of appreciation for our good fortune, let us perform shakubuku and share the true Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin with those who have not yet encountered it.

As we advance with devotion toward the achievement of a membership of 800,000 Hokkeko believers by 2021, the 800th anniversary of the advent of our Founder Nichiren Daishonin, let us focus on accomplishing this year's shakubuku goal for each of our chapters.