

Sidebar: The Poor Woman's Lamp
By Daisaku Ikeda, SGI President

I am a believer of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. In a letter the Daishonin wrote seven hundred years ago in appreciation of sincere offerings made by a devout woman called Onichi-nyo, there is a passage which reads: "A poor woman cut off her hair and sold it to buy oil [for the Buddha], and not even the winds sweeping down from Mount Sumeru could extinguish the flame of the lamp fed by this oil" ("Reply to Onichi-nyo," *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 1089). This story is derived from a Buddhist scripture and is known widely as "The Poor Woman's Lamp":

In the days of Shakyamuni Buddha there was a state called Magadha in ancient India. The well-known city of Rajagriha was the capital where the king of this state resided. An old woman lived nearby. A person of profound faith, she had always yearned to offer something precious to the Buddha, but, as alone and as poor as she was, she could not fulfill her desire.

One day on the street the old woman encountered a long procession of carts carrying a large quantity of flax oil. Upon asking, she learned that the oil was a donation which Ajatashatru, the king of the country, was sending to the Buddha. Deeply moved, the old woman also longed to make an offering, but she had no money whatsoever. She decided to cut off her own hair and sell it. (Some say she had saved a little from the alms she had received.) With that money she bought a small amount of flax oil and went to offer it to the Buddha. She thought: "With so little oil a lamp will only burn half a night. However, if the Buddha recognizes my faith and feels compassion for me, then the lamp will burn throughout the night."

Her wish was fulfilled and the lamp continued to burn throughout the night, while all the other lamps went out in the strong winds which blew from the direction of Mount Sumeru. When day broke, people tried to blow it out, but, on the contrary, her lamp continued to glow all the more, so brightly as to almost illuminate the entire world. Then Shakyamuni Buddha scolded his disciples who were doing everything possible to extinguish the glowing light:

"Stop! Stop! This old woman made offerings to eighteen million Buddhas from her previous existences and received a prophecy from a Buddha in her last life that she would attain Buddhahood." Then Shakyamuni Buddha proclaimed that in the future she would certainly become a Buddha called Lamp Light Sumeru. Needless to say, upon hearing that, the old woman was overjoyed. By contrast, Ajatashatru, even though he had donated tens of thousands of times as much oil as the old woman, could not receive a prophecy of enlightenment because he had an overwhelming sense of arrogance within himself.

This is a parable, of course, but I think it could be considered philosophical in that it holds a great deal of meaning. What "The Poor Woman's Lamp" teaches us is, more than anything else, the value of sincerity. It is true that her efforts were not impressive, and people preoccupied with mundane affairs might not have taken the slightest notice of the dedication she expressed in offering the small amount of oil. But Shakyamuni was indeed a man of penetrating insight. You can no more sever the ties of sincerity which bind human beings to one another in the depths of their lives than you can cut through water or

air. Even when all other things wane and collapse into the whirlpool of life's relentless difficulties, such sincerity will only glow all the more brilliantly. I cannot help but feel that, in the light of the lamp which the old woman offered, Shakyamuni saw the light of life which never fades away.

It is not the material worth of an offering but the spirit behind it that counts. The poor woman's single lamp meant far more than the five thousand barrels of lamp oil which Ajatashatru, the ruler of that country, donated to the Buddha. The little lamp contained the sincerity that a nameless woman felt with her entire being. A mind which attaches importance even to the slightest matters and which loves and treasure even seemingly insignificant things can profoundly move people even through a small action. It seems to me, however, that modern society has long allowed this spirit to pass into oblivion, leaving it far behind in the march of history.

I would like to mention my mother who died several years ago [on September 6, 1976] at the age of eighty. Probably because she was born in the Meiji era [1868–1912], an era of non-affluence, and barely managed to raise her many children amid war and poverty, she was as meticulous as anyone and valued even the slightest things. It was quite natural for her to do so when commodities were scarce, but even a few decades after the Second World War, when people began to enjoy many consumer goods, she still retained this tendency. Whenever she bought anything at department stores or other shops, she would unfold every single piece of wrapping paper and smooth out its wrinkles, then fold it and put it away. Even though the children told her to throw the paper away, she would always say, "I cannot be so wasteful!" although she had not definite idea as to how she would use it. Even now I feel that her sincere attitude, which is deeply etched in my mind, is an invaluable asset. This was not only true of my mother. We see many women of this type, especially among those born in the Meiji era. Every time I see such women, I feel that I am being reminded of something important.

In the wake of consumption-oriented trend created by the economic boom following the Second World War, people have lost the habit of valuing once-rare commodities, and in consequence, they have unknowingly lost the spirit of loving and treasuring even small things. This failure of a materialistic civilization has, at the same time, served to demoralize the people, increasing social confusion. The turbulent trends of the times since the oil shortage and environmental crises are clear indications that we must learn from these problems. The importance of spiritual values, even in the most inconspicuous areas, is the very point which "The Poor Woman's Lamp" brings sharply to our attention.

This is a subject close to your own daily lives. Whether your apartment has two or three rooms along with a dining room and a kitchen, or just one room, I hope you will cherish that "small castle" as the place which supports your everyday existence. You may come to feel a strong attachment for even a piece of furniture that you have long become accustomed to, even though it may have become old-fashioned and perhaps a little worn around the edges.

I believe it is important to treasure such feelings. A worn-out piece of furniture perhaps symbolizes a beautiful sentiment developed out of a harmonious and lasting relationship between the wife and husband; my wife and I have long cherished such feelings. The deep concern and compassion of a woman will be crystallized in such words and actions that enrich the lives of their children and husbands. At the same time,

like the sun, they will light up the community, just as the poor woman's lamp illuminated the entire world. I believe that without doing something of this sort in your own daily life, no matter how hard you may strive for social reformation, your efforts will eventually reach an impasse and become fruitless.

One of the major Japanese daily newspapers carried an editorial at the beginning of this year (1978), which reads in part: "It is now crucial to develop 'the common understanding that we are all living in the same human society' and to put that understanding to work for the construction of a new, mutually cooperative world." I wish to be a man who can live every single day with a deep awareness of the sweat and toil of those tens or hundreds of people involved in the production of each meal I eat and each piece of clothing I wear. I believe that that in itself is a first step, one that should be confident and full of pride, toward building such a new world. (*Treasures of the Heart*, pp. 3–8)