

SGI President Ikeda's Study Lecture Series

“The Dragon Gate”

“My Wish Is That All My Disciples Make a
Great Vow”—Carrying On the Great Vow
for the Happiness of All Humanity

Excerpts From *Learning From the Writings:
The Hope-filled Teachings of Nichiren Daishonin*

A waterfall called the Dragon Gate exists in China. Its waters plunge a hundred feet, swifter than an arrow shot by a strong warrior. It is said that a great many carp gather in the basin below, hoping to climb the falls, and that any that succeeds will turn into a dragon. Not a single carp, however, out of a hundred, a thousand, or even ten thousand, can climb the falls, not even after ten or twenty years. Some are swept away by the strong currents, some fall prey to eagles, hawks, kites, and owls, and others are netted, scooped up, or even shot with arrows by fishermen who line both banks of the

falls ten *cho* wide. Such is the difficulty a carp faces in becoming a dragon . . .

Attaining Buddhahood is no easier than for men of low status to enter court circles, or for carp to climb the Dragon Gate. Shariputra, for example, practiced bodhisattva austerities for sixty kalpas in order to attain Buddhahood, but finally could persevere no longer and slipped back into the paths of the two vehicles¹ . . .

My wish is that all my disciples make a great vow. (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, pp. 1002–03)

The Tale of the Dragon Gate

In this letter, Nichiren Daishonin emphasizes that attaining Buddhahood entails overcoming many hurdles and difficulties. To make his point, he draws analogies from the ancient Chinese tale of the Dragon Gate waterfall and the history of the Taira clan in Japan. He also gives an example from the Buddhist scriptures on the difficulty of attaining Buddhahood, citing the story of how Shariputra, one of Shakyamuni's ten major disciples, regressed in his Buddhist practice in a past existence.

Some sources place the legendary Dragon Gate on the upper or middle reaches of the Yellow River. It was held that carp that managed to climb the falls would become dragons. In this letter, the Daishonin describes the Dragon Gate as one hundred feet high and ten *cho* (0.6 miles) wide. In some of his other writings,² he describes it as being one thousand feet high and located on Mount T'ien-t'ai.³ Given these divergences, it is difficult for us to come up with a definitive picture of the falls. Be that as it may, however, the story goes that the force of the current is so intense that most of the carp are unsuccessful in their attempts to climb the falls, no matter how many times they try. Moreover, birds of prey and fishermen lie in wait to catch them. Only a carp that can overcome all these

challenges and reach the top of the waterfall can become a dragon with the power to control the rain and thunderclouds. This story is related in the Chinese historical text *The Book of the Later Han*. In many countries in the East to this day, the expression “climbing the Dragon Gate” is used to indicate surmounting difficult hurdles or high barriers to gain success in society or one’s profession.

Through this example, Nichiren highlights for [Nanjo] Tokimitsu [to whom this letter was written] that remaining steadfast in one’s Buddhist practice to the very end is an undertaking fraught with as many difficulties as a carp faces in climbing the Dragon Gate and turning into a dragon. The strong currents of the waterfall that drive the fish back can be likened to the conditions of an evil age defiled by the five impurities⁴ as described in the Lotus Sutra; while the birds of prey and fishermen can be likened to the three obstacles and four devils⁵ and the three powerful enemies⁶ that hinder one’s efforts to attain Buddhahood.

Persevering in faith in the evil age of the Latter Day of the Law is like swimming upstream against a powerful current. It is hard enough just to resist the insidious forces exerted by our own earthly desires and fundamental darkness. Shakyamuni compared these forces to a strong current or flood. Nichiren explains that this is even more true in the Latter Day, when even seemingly remarkable human wisdom and ingenuity can be inundated by an inexorable tide of deluded impulses fueled by the three poisons of greed, anger and foolishness—an ever-growing tide that wreaks havoc as a force of evil (see “The Kalpa of Decrease,” WND-1, 1121).

Precisely because it is so difficult to carry out faith in the Mystic Law in such an age, the bond of mentor and disciple in Buddhism takes on decisive importance. Likewise, a harmonious community of fellow practitioners solidly united in purpose—in what Nichiren terms “the spirit of many in body, one in mind”—is also indispensable. The Soka Gakkai possesses the bond of mentor and

disciple that is strong enough to withstand any adversity. And its members—noble ordinary people who are polishing their lives by striving in faith with the same commitment as their mentor—are allied together in solid unity. Moreover, countless members, like magnificent dragons born through the triumphant ascent of the waterfall, are leading lives of profound dignity and confidence forged through continually challenging themselves in their faith and self-development.

(Learning From the Writings: The Hope-filled Teachings of Nichiren Daishonin, pp. 119–20)

Be Wary of Negative Influences, or “Evil Friends”

Dragons have the job of making the rain fall—this same work can be regarded as a burden or as a mission, depending on how one looks at it. This difference in outlook or attitude is also what determines whether we will be defeated by negative influences, or evil friends, or successfully attain Buddhahood. Truly, as Nichiren says, “It is the heart that is important” (“The Strategy of the Lotus Sutra,” WND-1, 1000). And this difference in heart or spirit comes down to whether or not we embrace the great vow that is mentioned in this letter.

To bring our practice of the Lotus Sutra, or the Mystic Law, to successful completion means that we must eagerly and joyfully embrace the mission of taking on the sufferings of still more and more people and of challenging even greater difficulties in our cause for peace and happiness. Nichiren urges us to actively seek this way of life, to valiantly climb the Dragon Gate of faith as successors of kosen-rufu, and attain Buddhahood without fail. As practitioners of the Mystic Law, this is what it means for us to “live based on a great vow.”

(Learning From the Writings: The Hope-filled Teachings of Nichiren Daishonin, p. 125)

Notes

1. This story is found in *The Treatise on Great Perfection of Wisdom*. Once, when Shariputra was engaged in offering alms as part of his bodhisattva practice in a previous existence, a Brahman begged him for his eye. Shariputra gave it to him, but the Brahman was so revolted by its smell that he dropped it on the ground and trampled on it. Seeing this, Shariputra discontinued his bodhisattva practice, retreating into the Hinayana teachings, or the way of voice-hearers, and failed to attain Buddhahood (see “The Dragon Gate,” WND-1, 1004).
2. See “Letter to Akimoto,” WND-1, 1021, and “Climbing Up Dragon Gate,” WND-2, 673.
3. Mount T’ien-t’ai: A mountain in Zhejiang Province in China where the Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai lived and where the T’ien-t’ai school was based. Mount T’ien-t’ai prospered as a center of Chinese Buddhism, and a number of temples were built there.
4. Five impurities: Also, five defilements. “Expedient Means,” the second chapter of the Lotus Sutra, says, “The Buddhas appear in evil worlds of five impurities . . . In this evil world of the five impurities those who merely delight in and are attached to the desires, living beings such as this in the end will never seek the Buddha way.” (1) Impurity of the age includes repeated disruptions of the social or natural environment. (2) Impurity of desire is the tendency to be ruled by the five delusive inclinations (greed, anger, foolishness, arrogance and doubt). (3) Impurity of living beings is the physical and spiritual decline of human beings. (4) Impurity of thought, or impurity of view, is the prevalence of wrong views such as the five false views. (5) Impurity of life span is the shortening of the life spans of living beings. According to *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*, the most fundamental of these five are the impurities of thought and desire, which result in the impurity of living beings and the impurity of life span. These in turn give rise to the impurity of the age.
5. Three obstacles and four devils: Various obstacles and hindrances to the practice of Buddhism. The three obstacles are (1) the obstacle of earthly desires, (2) the obstacle of karma and (3) the obstacle of retribution. The four devils are (1) the hindrance of the five components, (2) the hindrance of earthly desires, (3) the hindrance of death and (4) the hindrance of the devil king.
6. Three powerful enemies: Also, three types of enemies. Three types of arrogant people who persecute those who propagate the Lotus Sutra in the evil age after Shakyamuni Buddha’s death. Miao-lo summarizes these three as follows: (1) “The arrogance and presumption of lay people” or arrogant lay people; a reference to those ignorant of Buddhism who curse and speak ill of the practitioners of the Lotus Sutra and attack them with swords and staves. (2) “The arrogance and presumption of members of the Buddhist clergy” or arrogant priests. These are priests with perverse wisdom and hearts that are fawning and crooked who, though failing to understand Buddhism, boast they have attained the Buddhist truth and slander the sutra’s practitioners. (3) “The arrogance and presumption of those who pretend to be sages” or arrogant false sages. This third category is described as priests who pretend to be sages and who are revered as such, but when encountering the practitioners of the Lotus Sutra become fearful of losing fame or profit and induce secular authorities to persecute them.