Next, the four debts of gratitude of Buddhism are (1) the debt of gratitude to be paid to one’s father and mother; (2) the debt of gratitude to be paid to the ruler of the nation; (3) the debt of gratitude to be paid to all living beings; and (4) the debt of gratitude to be paid to the three treasures [the Buddha, the Law, and the Order].

Third is the debt of gratitude to be paid to all living beings. If you stop to consider, you will realize that, at one time or another in the past, all men have been your father and all women, your mother. Thus, in the course of all the many lifetimes and existences you have lived through, you have come to owe a debt of gratitude to all living beings. And since this is so, you should help all of them to attain Buddhahood.

(\textit{The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin}, vol. 2, pp. 636–37)

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**Challenging Our Human Revolution Is the Way To Repay Our Debts of Gratitude**

\textbf{Nichiren Daishonin} discusses the four debts of gratitude as elucidated from the perspective of Buddhism.

Gratitude entails knowing to whom we are indebted for our present life and circumstances and, by dedicating ourselves to our Buddhist practice, repaying that debt of gratitude. In another sense, repaying our debts of gratitude means elevating our state of life from one of being supported by others to supporting others and drawing the power to do so from the innermost depths of our being.

In Sanskrit, there is the expression \textit{krita-jna}, which literally means “acknowledging (\textit{jna}) what has been done on one’s behalf (\textit{krita}).” After one acknowledges and appreciates what has been done for one, the next step is to live a life dedicated to the welfare of others. This is the origin of the phrase \textit{repaying debts of gratitude} that appears in the Chinese sutras.

Knowing and having appreciation for the fact that who we are now is the result of the actions and support of many others can powerfully affirm our sense of self and establish a solid foundation for our lives, which creates the basis for ongoing personal growth.
Repaying our debts of gratitude is the challenge of human revolution, the process by which we can develop our potential to the greatest possible extent.

In this letter, Nichiren discusses the four debts of gratitude owed by all.

The first is the debt of gratitude to one’s father and mother. How infinitely profound is the debt we owe to our parents who gave us life and nurtured us! The Daishonin says that our debt to our father is higher than Mount Sumeru, and our debt to our mother is deeper than the ocean (see WND-2, 637). We must find some way of repaying this enormous debt. The first thing we need to do, he tells us, is to take faith in Buddhism (see WND-2, 637). The greatest wish of parents is the growth and happiness of their children, so entering the path to happiness by having faith in and practicing Buddhism is the kindest thing we can do for our parents and the best way to repay our debt of gratitude to them.

Second is the debt of gratitude to the nation’s ruler. This is the gratitude owed to the sovereign for supporting one’s livelihood, thereby providing one with food, shelter and clothing (see WND-2, 637). In today’s democratic world, where sovereignty rests with the people, it is gratitude to society itself. Similarly, therefore, Nichiren’s remarks about praying for the ruler to “enjoy peace and security in the present existence and good circumstances in future existences” (see The Lotus Sutra and Its Opening and Closing Sutras, p. 136), could today be interpreted as praying for the happiness of every member of society.

The third is the debt of gratitude to all living beings. Life is eternal, extending through the three existences of past, present and
future; the sutras teach that we have been born in this world after having undergone the cycle of birth and death infinite times. From that point of view, at one time or another in the past, all men have been our father and all women have been our mother (see WND-2, 637). Buddhism sees us all as related and owing debts of gratitude to one another.

Nichiren indicates here that this is why we should wish for the happiness of all people. Since supreme happiness lies in attaining the life state of Buddhahood, the best way to repay our debt of gratitude to others is to teach them Buddhism, the ultimate means for gaining enlightenment.

[Second Soka Gakkai President Josei] Toda said: “True greatness means that, even if you forget what you’ve done for others, you never forget what others have done for you, and always do your utmost to repay your debts of gratitude. Therein shines the light of Buddhism. Such people radiate integrity, depth of character, generosity and charm.”

This, too, is the conclusion at which I have arrived after more than 60 years of Buddhist practice. I have seen many different people—people who have lived lives of gratitude, people who have been ingrates. Those who have a sense of appreciation and gratitude are loved and trusted by everyone, and lead lives of tremendous fulfillment and satisfaction. Based on the Daishonin’s teachings, it is clear that the inner radiance of those who embody true gratitude will imbue their lives with indestructible good fortune and benefit throughout the three existences.

If one asks, then, what sutra enables one to repay the four debts of gratitude, I would reply that it is none other than the Lotus Sutra, which reveals that women can attain Buddhahood . . .

[What] reason is there to believe that our mothers, through the power of this sutra, cannot become Buddhas? Therefore a person who upholds the Lotus Sutra is repaying the debt of gratitude owed to father and mother. Even if one does not feel in one’s own heart that one can do so, one can repay it through the power of this sutra. (WND-2, 637–38)

The Lotus Sutra Is the Sole Buddhist Teaching That Enables One To Repay the Debt of Gratitude to One’s Mother

Fourth, Nichiren Daishonin teaches that repaying our debt of gratitude to the three treasures of Buddhism is most important in order to establish the best possible life as a human being. The three treasures are the three pillars of Buddhist faith and practice—namely, the treasure of the Buddha, the treasure of the Law (the Buddha’s teachings) and the treasure of the Buddhist Order (the community of believers). Nichiren’s discussion of the debt of gratitude we owe to the three treasures in this writing is predicated on the question of what is the sutra that truly benefits all people.

Referring to Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai’s classification of Shakyamuni’s lifetime teachings according to five periods, the Daishonin specifically investigates which sutras contain the teaching of the attainment of Buddhahood by women, which he identifies as the criterion for repaying one’s gratitude to one’s parents, and
especially to one’s mother. The classification of the five periods evaluates Shakyamuni’s teachings, not just in terms of chronological periods, but based on a thorough investigation of the Buddha’s true intent—that is, what his message was and how he was trying to convey it. We can assume that Nichiren is presenting the basics of this classification system to Tokimitsu here in an easily accessible fashion, as an aid to the young man’s further study of Buddhism.

He then poses the question of which sutra enables one to truly repay the four debts of gratitude. He indicates that when the Buddhist scriptures are measured by the benchmark teaching of the attainment of enlightenment by women, only the Lotus Sutra passes the test.

Tokimitsu’s father died when he was young, and it was his mother (the lay nun Ueno) who kept the family together. Having personally witnessed this, Tokimitsu must have earnestly wished to repay his debt of gratitude to his mother and assure her abiding happiness. At the same time, he must have also felt a desire to repay his debt of gratitude to his father, who had taught him about faith in the Mystic Law.

In this letter, Nichiren directly addresses the foremost concern of Tokimitsu, opening the young man’s eyes to the greatness of Buddhism and teaching him how to live as a person of wisdom.

When the four virtues—starting with the Taoist and Confucian teaching of being good to one’s parents and evolving into a code of conduct for worthies and sages—are regarded anew from the perspective of the supreme teaching of the Lotus Sutra, they can all be regarded as actions of Buddhas in daily life. This includes such things as smiling at our mother to reassure her, winning the trust of others at our workplace, respecting our friends and treating our juniors with compassion.

The Mystic Law is the great teaching that leads not only our parents, to whom we owe a profound debt, but also our siblings, our friends and all those in our lives to happiness that will endure throughout the three existences of past, present and future. Even if our parents and friends don’t understand our Buddhist practice now, the beneficial power of the Mystic Law is absolute. If we ourselves strive earnestly in faith, we will definitely be able to lead those around us to enlightenment, just as the sun rises in the sky and brightly illuminates all on earth. There is no need to fret or to rush things.

Some families have no children. But all the children in the Soka Gakkai are our children, our successors in our kosen-rufu movement. Be positive and confident that your encouragement to these youthful successors will be a source of strength for them and will shine in their lives as treasures of the heart.

(Excerpted from the October 2012 Living Buddhism, pp. 28–31)

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1. The four debts of gratitude discussed by Nichiren in this letter are based on those enumerated in the Contemplation on the Mind-Ground Sutra. The definition of the four debts of gratitude varies somewhat according to the source. In addition, the four debts of gratitude listed by the Daishonin in his treatise “On Repaying Debts of Gratitude” comprise the debts owed to one’s parents, one’s teacher, the three treasures and one’s sovereign (see WND-1, 728). In this latter case, the debt to one’s teachers is believed to have been included as an expression of Nichiren’s appreciation for his deceased teacher, Dozen-bo.

2. Mount Sumeru is the mountain that stands at the center of the world in ancient Indian cosmology.

3. “The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs,” the fifth chapter of the Lotus Sutra, states, “Once these living beings have heard the Law, they will enjoy peace and security in their present existence and good circumstances in future existences” (LSOC, 136).

4. The five periods are (1) the Flower Garland period, (2) the Agama period, (3) the Correct and Equal period, (4) the Wisdom period and (5) the Lotus and Nirvana period.

5. The four virtues are (1) filial piety toward one’s father and mother; (2) loyalty to one’s lord; (3) courtesy toward one’s friends; and (4) pity and kindness toward those less fortunate than oneself.