

## Faith for Overcoming Obstacles

When we exercise with weights, the resistance strengthens our muscles and helps them grow. Similarly, the difficulties and challenges we encounter along the journey of life enable us to strengthen and improve our lives and our character. By applying our Buddhist practice to facing and winning over challenges, we train and develop our “muscles” of wisdom, life force, courage and compassion. These qualities accord with the state of life called Buddhahood, to which Buddhist practitioners aspire. When we view things this way, our problems become opportunities to build a solid foundation for unshakable happiness.

Buddhism describes two major categories of obstacles. The first is the “three obstacles and four devils”—obstacles encountered by those who strive to reveal and develop their Buddha nature. The second is the “three powerful enemies,” which, the Lotus Sutra explains, attack genuine practitioners of the sutra who endeavor to spread its teachings. Since our Buddhist practice involves these two aspects, we need to be prepared to recognize and challenge both categories of obstacles.

### The Three Obstacles and Four Devils

The “three obstacles and four devils” symbolize the internal and external functions that impede our progress toward genuine happiness, or enlightenment. Nichiren Daishonin quotes the Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai, who explained in *Great Concentration and Insight*: “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” (see “Letter to the Brothers,” *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 501).

Here, Nichiren reiterates that these hindrances emerge “in confusing form,” which means that their influence is usually not obvious or easy to recognize. We should be diligent in learning how to identify them and in developing the strength to win over them. Otherwise, we risk being “frightened” or “influenced” by these negative functions, allowing them to cloud our Buddha nature and obstruct our Buddhist practice.

The three obstacles are: (1) the obstacle of earthly desires; (2) the obstacle of karma (the negative actions or offenses we commit in this life); and (3) the obstacle of retribution (the negative effects of our actions in past lives, or karma). The four devils are: (1) the hindrance of the five components—hindrances caused by one’s own physical and mental functions; (2) the hindrance of earthly desires—hindrances arising from greed, anger and foolishness; (3) the hindrance of death—one’s own untimely death obstructing one’s Buddhist practice or doubts arising from the untimely death of a fellow practitioner; and (4) the hindrance of the devil king of the sixth heaven—a strong negative influence taking various forms to cause practitioners to discard their Buddhist practice.

The three obstacles and four devils are functions that sap the bright, positive life condition we gain from our practice; they weaken our spirit to fight for our own happiness and that of others, leaving us with diminished courage and wisdom. In particular, the devil king of the sixth heaven is described as being most powerful.<sup>1</sup> It represents negative functions that can operate through influential people in our environment to discourage us from pursuing our Buddhist practice and keep us in a place of victimhood and suffering. The function arises from the human tendency to be ignorant of the fundamental dignity of life and to deny the noble potential for Buddhahood that all people possess. That tendency or ignorance is known as fundamental darkness. But more important than wondering what category of obstacle or devil our problems fall into is to recognize those things

that hinder our Buddhist practice and challenge them with faith, prayer and action.

Lasting happiness can be achieved through learning to win over our inner darkness, or ignorance. SGI President Ikeda explains: “Buddhism is a struggle between the Buddha and the devil. It is by drawing out into the open, battling and defeating the three obstacles and four devils that we ourselves can become Buddhas” (January 2004 *Living Buddhism*, p. 48).

By continuously engaging in this challenge to activate our fundamental enlightenment, we can forge an indestructible foundation of happiness. When obstacles and devilish functions emerge, that is exactly the time to fight to change our karma and to win for the sake of our happiness.

As Nichiren writes, “The three obstacles and four devils will invariably appear, and the wise will rejoice while the foolish will retreat” (“The Three Obstacles and Four Devils,” WND-1, 637). Urging us to never retreat, he calls on us to joyfully challenge and overcome our problems. The wise rejoice because they know that obstacles and opposition are the resistance that makes it possible for them to achieve enlightenment.

## The Three Powerful Enemies

In “Encouraging Devotion,” the 13th chapter of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni describes three types of people who will persecute and try to stop the sutra’s votaries from spreading its teachings (see *The Lotus Sutra and Its Opening and Closing Sutras*, pp. 232–34). These are: 1) arrogant lay people; (2) arrogant priests; and (3) arrogant false sages who conspire with secular authorities to persecute the sutra’s votaries. The common thread among these “three powerful enemies” is arrogance—their belief that they are better than others.

The first of the powerful enemies is described as those ignorant of Buddhism who denounce and speak ill of those who practice the Lotus Sutra, who directly attack practitioners and try to ruin their societal standing or even their well-being.

The second of the powerful enemies comprises arrogant and cunning priests who, believing themselves superior to others, deviously try to ingratiate themselves with the powerful while looking down on the people. The enemies in this second category claim to have mastered Buddhism but refrain from practicing the correct Buddhist teaching. Instead, they slander and attack those who earnestly practice and uphold that teaching.

The third and most powerful enemy corresponds to priests who pretend to be and are revered as sages, but whose true motives are status and profit. Fearing a loss of prestige, they make false accusations to secular authorities and collude with those in power to persecute practitioners of the Lotus Sutra.

The sutra predicts that these three powerful enemies, intent on stopping the flow of kosen-rufu, will attack those who uphold, practice and spread the Lotus Sutra. Even if one can persevere under the attack of the first two, the last powerful enemy remains a formidable challenge because of the difficulty of perceiving the true identity of false sages.

Nichiren says: “A sword is useless in the hands of a coward. The mighty sword of the Lotus Sutra must be wielded by one courageous in faith” (“Reply to Kyo’o,” WND-1, 412).

Encountering obstacles is part of life. No one can escape them. But rather than reacting out of fear, we practitioners of Nichiren Buddhism can instead summon courage as we wield the mighty sword of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

President Ikeda states: “Attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime entails a fierce struggle to change our karma, as well as to overcome the various challenges posed to our practice by the three obstacles

and four devils, and the three powerful enemies. The trials of winter are unavoidable if we wish to soar into a brilliant springtime based on faith” (*Learning From the Writings: The Hope-filled Teachings of Nichiren Daishonin*, pp. 104–05).

By decisively facing and overcoming negative functions and obstacles, we can transform our karma and reveal our full potential while fulfilling our unique missions in life.

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the Soka Gakkai's monthly study journal*

## Notes

1. The devil king is said to rouse his ten forces, which are the various illusions that plague human beings. They are: (1) desire, (2) care and worry, (3) mental and physical hunger, (4) love of pleasure, (5) mental vagueness and lack of responsiveness, (6) fear, (7) doubt and regret, (8) anger, (9) preoccupation with wealth and fame, and (10) arrogance and contempt for others.