

## **SERMON ON REQUITAL FOR THE BUDDHA'S FAVOR**

**By Reverend Raido Hirota**

Traits of weakness are not specific to Dozenbo\*. We are all guilty of cowardice, delusion, self-preservation, self-defense, and placating to others. Believers should keep in mind that our faith is more important than anything, and we should overcome our trepidation and cowardice.

Nichien Daishonin wrote “Requital for the Buddha's Favor” on July 21st in the 2nd year of Kenji (1276) as an expression of gratitude for his teacher. The actual date of Dozenbo's death is undetermined but thought to have been in June, a month prior to this Gosho being written. Since telephones and telegrams did not exist in those days, the Daishonin learned of Dozenbo's death by letter several days later. As “The Requital for the Buddha's Favor” is a fairly long Gosho, it took a few days for Daishonin to write it. He must have spent those days grieving over his teacher's death and reminiscing about old times.

From the Buddhist point of view, Dozenbo's mind for pursuing faith was weak. He had turned a deaf ear to the Daishonin, the disciple he had taken under his wing and been fondest of. Never once did he take pity on this favorite disciple and try to visit him during the Daishonin's exile to Sado Island. Early in “Requital for the Buddha's Favor” Daishonin wrote, “Although one may exert one's full effort to save others, it is very difficult to save them from the karmic retribution that they have brought upon themselves.” Despite this observation, the Daishonin expressed his sadness and regret upon hearing of Dozenbo's death. And in fact, he was amazed by the extent of his own disquiet, knowing as he did of his teacher's weak faith and spineless nature, and often wondering what would happen to such a man after his death. Yet, as he explained, “In spite of all that, I thought a great deal of [Dozenbo], and when I heard the news of his death, I felt as though, whether I had to walk through fire or wade through water, I must rush to his grave, pound on it, and recite a volume of the Lotus Sutra for his sake.”

In The Classic of Filial Piety Confucius teaches that “if after three attempts to warn the rulers of the nation one's advice is still unheeded, one should leave the area.” Daishonin vowed to follow this sage advice and adjourn to Mount Minobu in order to show the extent of his concern for the nation. I believe before he entered the wilderness of Minobu the Daishonin declared his intentions to many people, including the Kamakura government. He realized how closed-minded and selfish

the government was, only being concerned with securing its power, and caring nothing for the people. Thus, upon entering the wilderness, the Daishonin turned his attention away from remonstrating with the government, and embarked on ensuring the correct transmission of his teachings of the Lotus Sutra to each individual in the Latter Day.

To say the least, the Daishonin's life on Sado Island was rough. Such being the case, it is unimaginable that he voluntarily adjourned to the wilderness of Mount Minobu where life was even harsher. On Mount Minobu, he made his home in a single dwelling surrounded by lofty mountains, some of whose peaks remained snowcapped year round. The place was so inaccessible visitors were rare, and his only neighbors were the monkeys who, infrequent as it was, came swinging through the trees. Food was another problem, being scarce and inadequate. The Daishonin determined his course of action based on faith, and decided that living thus was the way for him to make a living, and he did so courageously with only his faith to guide him. He was not in retirement from active life on Minobu; he never renounced the world. But people said he had left the world, though none of the believers who visited him at Minobu thought this. It was only the general public that did.

The other day I was watching a special program on TV. It was about a man who became a priest after he was fired from his job. This is unthinkable to me. I have also heard of a woman who became a priest after being jilted by her lover. I think believers who have such priests are unfortunate. Those priests renounced the world and then entered the priesthood. I don't believe priests should renounce the world; people in the world cannot come to such priests looking for support and guidance. I also think something is wrong with a temple where such people are allowed to become priests.

The man in the TV program kept his new life secret from his wife and children. They did not learn of his new lifestyle until he was ordained a priest. When they came to see him at the temple they wept. None of this made sense to me. However, it exemplifies the image the general public holds of the priesthood. Some priests enter the priesthood because they want to save the world, but the public believes they became priests because they wanted to renounce the world. This is an awful misunderstanding. If I said that I renounced the world, there would be no need for you to visit this temple, for it would mean that I have abandoned the society of people as well as the world.

The view of the priesthood was much the same during the Kamakura era (1185-1333). In those days, many people who grew tired of the on-going power struggle within the ruling classes became

priests. In contrast, the Daishonin became a priest to discover the true teaching in the world. Once vested with the true and foremost teaching, the Daishonin sought to attain enlightenment, and at the same time to help others, including his parents and relatives, to attain enlightenment, too. Notwithstanding, society declared that he had turned tail and fled from the world to the wilderness of Minobu. Daishonin was well aware of the public's view, though none of his believers shared the public's perception. Yet, regardless of what the world might think, the Daishonin forthrightly announced to the Kamakura government that he would adjourn to Minobu to explore the correct way to transmit the true teachings. His move to Minobu was not made for personal reasons, but for the public good - for the benefit of this Buddhism. However, because society viewed him as having retired from the world, Daishonin realized if he left Minobu to visit his late master's grave, people would suppose he had failed to accomplish his purpose. For this reason he finally decided against visiting Dozenbo's grave no matter how much he wished to do so. His reason for visiting the grave would have been strictly personal, and personal affairs is what he had renounced.

When Nichiren Daishonin entered the Kiyosumi temple at the age of 12, two senior priests, Jokenbo and Gijobo, acted as teachers to him, instructing him in various matters with great care and kindness. These two priests were important and instrumental to Nichiren's progress. At the end of the Heian era (794-1185) there was a high priest of the Sanron sect of the seven temples of Nara called Gonso. In 802 Gonso was defeated in debate by Dengyo-the-Great, and he immediately renounced his sect and became a disciple of Dengyo. At the end of the Nara era (710-794) there was an Administrator of Monks called Gyohyo (722-797) of the Daian temple of the Kegon sect (currently the Shingon sect). He was the priest who had administered the precepts of Buddhism to Dengyo in his youth, which means he was a teacher to Dengyo at the time Dengyo became a priest. When Gyohyo learned the teaching of Dengyo, he voluntarily renounced the teaching of the Kegon sect. As these two exemplary priests had done, Jokenbo and Gijobo likewise acted courageously and honorably and became disciples of Nichiren although they had once been his teachers.

Had Jokenbo and Gijobo been ill-disposed seniors who intimidated their juniors, they would not have valued Buddhism above all else, and would not have conducted themselves as they did. Seniors who tend to be habitually ill disposed would have refused to become disciples of someone such as Nichiren, saying that they remembered him as a kid with a runny nose who knew nothing. Jokenbo and Gijobo, however, were not like this; they did become disciples of Nichiren Daishonin. When they listened to the Daishonin's teaching they were persuaded that the purpose of becoming a priest was nothing more than to value the true teaching. They realized the teaching of the Shingon

sect was clearly wrong. They made the decision to accept the teaching of the Lotus Sutra and to revere Nichiren as their teacher.

As you know, some people assume that a person who is younger than them is inferior to them. They assume a younger person has a long way to go before he or she reaches where they are. They ridicule their juniors saying, "I've known you since you were in diapers." They should be ashamed of their behavior if it is in anyway inferior to that of their juniors who were once in diapers. We should make much of the substance of an individual and the way he lives. Age does not matter. When a younger person is right, we should revere him or her even though he or she may be younger than we by 20~30 years. Jokenbo and Gijobo were able to do so. They could do so because they were focused on the true reason and purpose of Buddhism rather than on their senior status. They knew what was most important, which is to have true faith and attain enlightenment. As far as faith is concerned, neither seniority of practice nor title is meaningful. If you boast of having practiced this faith for many years, you should conduct yourself accordingly. Otherwise you are not practicing your faith in accordance with the Daishonin's intention. In 1253, when Tojo Kagenobu tried to assassinate the Daishonin after he denounced the Nembutsu sect and declared the establishment of his new Buddhism, Jokenbo and Gijobo gave refuge to the Daishonin on Mount Kiyosumi and helped him escape. They demonstrated their dedication to the Lotus Sutra by safeguarding the life of the Lotus Sutra (the Daishonin). In the Gosho the Daishonin asserts that there can be no doubt of Jokenbo and Gijobo achieving enlightenment.

As I said earlier, Daishonin wrote "Requital For the Buddha's Favor" in the 2nd year of Kenji (1276). Two years later he sent the writing, "Questions and Answers on the Object of Worship" (Honzon-mondo-sho) to Jokenbo in the 1st year of Koan (1278). In this Gosho he wrote:

Though Dozenbo was my teacher, he was afraid of his landowner Tojo Kagenobu, a devout believer of the Nembutsu sect who constantly expressed enmity towards the Lotus Sutra. In the presence of his landowner, Dozenbo pretended to hate me, Nichiren, even though he felt sympathetic towards me at heart. They say Dozenbo came to believe in the Lotus Sutra late in life, but how did he die? It could not have been a peaceful death. I do not think he fell into hell, but neither could he have broken away from the cycle of rebirth in the six lower worlds. He could not fall into hell, nor could he attain enlightenment. Thus he is suspended in midair indefinitely without being able to be truly connected to the Lotus Sutra. I feel sad and regretful.

Here Daishonin shows that Tojo Kagenobu, who formed a reverse relationship with the Lotus Sutra by condemning the Daishonin, has more of a chance for salvation than Dozenbo who tried to please everyone. Jokenbo and Gijobo, after having protected the Daishonin and hiding him from the authorities, had no choice but to leave Mount Kiyosumi when the Daishonin did. Thereafter, they kept in touch and diligently practiced their faith. The brave effort of these two priests to protect the Daishonin was an expression of their dedication to the Lotus Sutra. There is no doubt that they will break away from the cycle of rebirth in the six lower worlds and attain enlightenment. Dozenbo, on the other hand, flattered both parties and tried to be a part of both. He was like a bat, which can almost belong to two species -- birds and mammals -- because it has both wings and mouse-like features. When the two groups came head to head in conflict, Dozenbo would take the side of the group that would be most advantageous for him. And when the conflict was over both groups disliked him. His attitude toward belief was similar to the status of a bat's: he could not be faithful to either side.

Dozenbo belonged to the Shingon sect, while his landowner, Tojo Kagenobu, belonged to the Nembutsu sect. If Dozenbo believed that the Shingon teaching was the best and true teaching, he should have remonstrated with his landowner for the sake of his faith. Instead, at the expense of his faith in the Shingon sect he flattered and kowtowed to his landowner of the Nembutsu sect, yielding to him and pretending to hate the Daishonin. Thus, he lived his life saddled with a dual or triple personality.

We cannot attain enlightenment if our minds are set on gratifying everyone. If you are like this you will lose sight of who you really are. Though some people claim that having no principle is their principle, it does not work. If you want to attain enlightenment and cultivate the Buddha's mind that is within your own life, you have to relinquish the attitude of satisfying each and everyone. Otherwise there is no salvation for you. If you practice as Dozenbo did, with a dual or triple personality, kowtowing to everyone, you will be destined after your death to hang in midair and not belong anywhere. Not only will you be unable to attain enlightenment, you will have even less of a chance for salvation than those who fall into hell. There will be no chance for you to awaken to the true teaching while in the midst of suffering in hell. You will vainly hang in midair, waiting for prayers and a stupa erected for the happy repose of the dead to be offered in your name by some living person.

In Buddhism hell is a place where one experiences suffering. When engulfed by tremendous suffering we vow that if we are born as a human being again we will not fail to practice the teaching

of Namu-Myoho-Renge-Kyo - the teaching that everyone possesses the Buddha's mind. Hell is a place that gives you a chance for awakening. It is not the end of life, but a place where one can practice to overcome the torments of hell. If we are suspended in midair and never experience hell's torment, how can we seek and find salvation?

For the past two months I have been discussing Dozenbo and have told you that we are all of the same mind as he. But MyohoRengeKyo is the underlying source of our lives. In other words, we exist because of Myohorengekyo. Therefore for our own sake we must not be caught up in self-protection. As the sutra suggests, we should not hold our life and body dear and begrudge the supreme teaching. If we love ourselves, we must highly value that which is the cause of our lives, the source of our lives. That is the Law. Since we all are governed by, and are alive as a result of this fundamental cause - the Law of MyohoRengeKyo - our lives cannot exist without highly esteeming this underlying source we are dependent on. If the air we breathe should disappear from this earth, we would all die in a matter of minutes; we would lose our precious lives only because of its absence. If we drown in water we will also die within a few minutes. And likewise, no matter how much we might love our own life, we will lose it if we were severed from the source that sustains it.

The Buddha determined that the most fundamental cause - the source, the why and wherefore of life - is the Law of Namu-Myoho-Renge-Kyo. The Lotus Sutra teaches that the most important thing in life is not to be self-absorbed, but to devote one's life to the Law of Namu-Myoho-Renge-Kyo. Thus if we value ourselves, we should make much of this teaching for our own sake. Dozenbo, unfortunately, cared so much about himself to the extent that his perspective was obscured. He completely lost sight of the source of life - the Law. It is understandable that we care about ourselves. Even small insects do. But we human beings must realize that there is a Law that we should value above all else. We cannot save ourselves with timid minds. Having faith means to become courageous. We cannot practice without the courage to put the Law into practice. I sincerely hope you will keep in mind that we should think much of our faith if we really care about our lives.