

On Prolonging Life

Nichiren Daishonin stated:

There are two types of illness: minor and serious. Early treatment by a skilled physician can cure even serious illnesses, not to mention minor ones. Karma also may be divided into two categories: mutable and immutable. Sincere repentance will eradicate even immutable karma, to say nothing of karma which is mutable.

(*Gosho*, p. 760; *MW-1*, p. 229)

The Daishonin was 58 years old when he wrote this *Gosho*. It was a letter addressed to Myojo, the wife of Toki Jonin. She had a gentle personality and gave her husband a lot of support. Together with her husband, she was a woman who carried through strong faith and practice. In her later years, however, she had problems with her health. It seemed that she met with a constant challenge from the obstacles of illness. In this letter the Daishonin teaches the ailing Myojo the tremendous power of this True Buddhism to change even the immutable karma of a person. He gives careful, detailed guidance on how to conduct her faith and practice and gives her encouragement.

In this *Gosho*, the Daishonin states first that illnesses can be divided into serious and slight; our karma, or life span can also be seen in terms of immutable or mutable karma, (unchangeable or changeable karma). A serious illness can be cured through the care of a skilled doctor. In the same way, a person's immutable karma, a fixed lifespan can be changed and prolonged through faith and practice in True Buddhism.

Because of her illness, Myojo was in the depths of despair, and in her misery she felt that her life was coming to an end. The Daishonin wrote this letter to encourage her and to give her the will to live.

For persons who are ill, emotions such as sadness, grief, and hopelessness are their worst enemies. They are often the cause of many illnesses; moreover, they aggravate and worsen the condition of those who are ill. For any illness, the condition of a person's body is deeply related to the condition of his or her mind and spirit. If the spirit is experiencing grief, the condition of the illness will worsen. On the other hand, if a flame of hope lights up in a person's heart, then he or she will be

able to muster up the strong life force to fight the illness.

There was a doctor's poll taken by a magazine. The question was: "What is needed to cure an illness?" the most frequently given answer was: "The patient's own recovery strength." And the second most popular answer was: "The patient's will power to overcome the disease."

When a patient mentally and spiritually falls into a condition of hopelessness and despair, the flow of blood slows down, the body temperature declines, and the oxygen supply in the body dwindles. This condition reduces the effectiveness of the immune system; this, in turn, creates favorable conditions for the malignant cells to multiply.

On the other hand, if a person is severely ill but manages not to be closed in by hopelessness and despair, and holds on to a sense of bright, cheery fulfillment, his or her condition will change for the better. The course of an illness is greatly influenced by the extent to which the patient himself fights the disease and by the kind of mental attitude he chooses to maintain.

A passage from the Seventh Volume of the Lotus Sutra reads:

This sutra is beneficial medicine for the illnesses of all mankind.

The Daishonin stresses the fact that the Lotus Sutra is, indeed, the great medicine that cures the various ills of the people; moreover, it especially guarantees happiness for women.

The Daishonin cites the actual proof of such figures as King Ajase, Ch'en Ch'en, and Bodhisattva Fukyo who were able to prolong their lives by transforming their immutable karma. In addition, the Daishonin gives his own experience about the actual proof he manifested by praying for his mother's recovery from an illness and prolonging her life by four years. Thus, he encourages Myojo to muster forth strong faith and practice from within herself.

Unless a person's life span, determined by his or her immutable karma or fixed destiny, has come to an end, the severest of illnesses is curable through the treatment of a good doctor. This is because the will to live and the strength to fight illness still exist inside the body.

If, however, the illness stems from the life span set by one's immutable

karma, then the life force itself weakens and threatens to disappear. Therefore, even the best doctor will be unable to help.

In such a situation, it is most important to first strengthen our life force. In order to revive our waning life force; there is no other way than to change our immutable karma, our fixed destiny, through the performance of *sange* based on True Buddhism.

Sange means to acknowledge one's faults, shortcomings or past misdeeds and seek to correct or make amends for them. Only by changing our immutable karma can our true life force well up from within our life.

Sange in general refer to the practice of admitting one's sins in front of a master or a father and asking forgiveness for them. The practice of *sange* that appears on the Lotus Sutra, however, has a deeper and more fundamental significance than this general sense.

A passage in the *Fugen* Sutra, the conclusion to the Lotus Sutra reads:

If you wish to perform *sange*, sit up straight and meditate on the true entity of life. Like the frost and dewdrops that vanish in the benevolent rays of the sun, the sins of all mankind will disappear without a trace.

(*Kaiketsu*, p. 648)

The true entity of life is the Mystic Law, and the Daishonin manifested it in the form of the Gohonzon of Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo. Thus, to "meditate on the true entity of life" means to believe in the Gohonzon and chant Daimoku. By doing this we can eradicate the various negative karma from the past lifetimes, like the frost and dew that vanish in the sunlight.