

## Relationships.

They can be the source of our greatest joys and, at times, our ultimate suffering. Add to that the unique circumstances of the past years, when the world found itself in the grips of Pandemic, as well as multiple wars and violence proliferating around the world. Political and propaganda so far from reason or fairness that nobody can claim to know the minds or agendas at any level of society.

A Keck Medicine of University of Southern California study showed that bad relationships can affect a person emotionally, physically and mentally, and even lower an individual's self-esteem. Of course we Buddhists understand immediately that this is the workings of the desires to please the Skandhas, our lower consciousnesses of sense organs.

When we consider the negative impact that difficult relationships can have on our well-being, it might seem easier not to deal with them at all. And yet, this too is "dealing" or actions creating repercussions to our Karma.

We've all considered these scenarios at one time or another:

- *"Should I find another job rather than deal with my difficult (add boss or co-worker here)?"*
- *"Would it be healthier for me to cut off my relationship with that toxic friend?"*
- *"Maybe it's time to take a break from my family?"*

We live in a society where it's the norm for people to cut ties with others. But, apart from scenarios where our safety is a concern, walking away from a difficult relationship only perpetuates loneliness and prevents us from developing our humanity.

Our relationship with Samsara must be lighted by Buddha-wisdom. As we course the Planet of this Saha World, we must understand and accept that our "self", our Saha bodies are in constant momentum and fluidly changing. To destroy something that is never static or to "build" a body in motion is a foolish task.

So what does Buddhism say about transforming difficult relationships? In "***On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime,***" one of Nichiren Shonin's key writings, he clarifies that if we seek happiness externally (in other words, wait for someone else to change, or seek the approval of others for our solidity), we will always be at

the whim of our environment and false ideas of self, Samsara. Nichiren, in fact, goes so far as to say:

*“If you seek enlightenment outside your flesh and blood body, then your performing even ten thousand practices and ten thousand good deeds will be in vain. It is like the case of a poor man who spends night and day counting his neighbor’s wealth but gains not even half a coin.”*

This may seem like a bitter pill to swallow when we’re locked in conflict with another person, especially when we feel we’re in the right. If we seek the law externally, it essentially amounts to evading responsibility for our lives, which runs counter to Nichiren Doctrine of Lotus Sutra Buddhism. It is like arguing with the ocean to be dry so that we no longer are wet. The truth is always within our experience of “being”. That is, the world or environment we experience is completely the result of our choosing. It may not seem so, but ask yourself how you find yourself in the situations you perceive yourself to be in, and if a simple change in perception might not make the entire thing evaporate. No one said it would be easy, but this is an essential part of Bodhisattva practice. Maintaining a clear view of all “things” as momentary expressions of potential, also means that every thing can completely change from one moment to another. So, in fact, there is no “solidity”. And to speak as though there is, well, that is the delusion of Samsara that leads to possession, ownership, accumulate, stress, anxiety, and Dukkha.

What then is the driving force for change?

Practicing Nichiren Doctrine of Lotus Sutra Buddhism means not being influenced this way and that; it means constructing a self that is resolute in practice, insights of Buddha-wisdom and embodies only momentum with nothing to destroy or rebuild. But if we neglect this task and focus our energies somewhere else, before we’re even aware of it, we can end up veering onto the path of externally seeking the Law. Or more to the point, externalizing our stress to place responsibility or blame onto our environment.

For example, if we chant to the Mandala of our GoHonzon-Mind but always blame other people or our environment, for our circumstances, we are avoiding the challenge of tackling our inner confusion or ignorance. By doing so, we are seeking enlightenment outside of ourselves. By changing ourselves on a more profound level, we can begin to improve our situation. Chanting NaMuMyoHoRenGeKyo is the driving force for that change. By aligning our mind with the fundamental truth of the a priori Law, the Engine of Life, we know our environment as the ultimate reflection of our Saha Mind experience.

## **Harmonious Coexistence**

**Buddhism teaches us** not only how to develop our ability to harmonize with those around us but also how to become individuals who can bring people together in the knowledge that we are all experiencing the Saha world from our own unique epistemology. As I have said on previous occasions, it is quite ridiculous to “take” offense when it is offered. Simply do not; short of actual harm which is a verifiable act, offense provides or affects nothing. Offense is simply the position be offered by someone of their internal struggle, and most often an embarrassment made all the more ugly by their verbalizing it. Empathy and sympathy with others is life affirming and constructive, while the nature of evil is to divide people from people, separating humanity from the rest of nature. This becomes a pathology of anxiety justifying every fear as some perverse “proof” for identity rather than life itself. The pathology of divisiveness drives people to an unreasoning attachment to difference and blinds them to human commonalities.”

So, how do we improve difficult relations?

## **The Power of Our Inner Determination**

**The Buddhist concept** of the “oneness of life and its environment” teaches that though our lives and environment are seemingly distinct phenomena, they are in fact two aspects of a single reality. It indicates that “life” constitutes a subjective self that experiences the effects of its past actions from moment-to-moment, while that self’s “environment” is a shared realm in which an individual’s karma finds expression as witnessed (subjectively again) by that “self”.

Simply put, our lives don’t exist or flourish in isolation. Rather, because we are a part of a larger, symbiotic fabric of coexistence, what we think, say and do, impact our families, communities, workplaces, nation and, ultimately, all humanity. This means that through a transformation in our hearts and minds, we can change our environment for the better and move our lives and society in the direction of harmony and peace. Influence is a powerful thing that is expressed with every action of thought, speech or body that we make.

Our Buddhist practice is our opportunity to train and condition our clear mind of perception and actions to transform our experience and thereby the experience of others as we radiate a mind of reason and understanding as the great benefit of our Buddhist practice.

Through our steady daily Buddhist practice, we quite naturally bring forth from within us the life states of Bodhisattva and Buddhahood—which are characterized

by a heart and that are steadfast, always victorious, trailblazing, progressing, resilient, resolute, courageous, compassionate, tolerant, encouraging, appreciative and undefeatable.

Changing our heart is not a matter of doing something that will only temporarily lift our mood or make us feel better, without changing our reality. A true change in our hearts is more profound; genuine inner change produces actual change in our lives. Deepening our “heart”—our life state—is the essence of our practice for human dignity and the clarity of our Buddha-wisdom to live our lives to full potential as we raise the condition of all living beings in our environs. When we speak of obtaining benefit through our Buddhist practice, we are ultimately referring to our inner transformation at the deepest level.

Our heart/mind duality determines whether or not we attain Buddhahood. That’s why “it is the compassionate heart working in concert with the clear Buddha-mind that is important.”

### ***Developing a Profound Belief in Others***

**You may be** wondering whether this means we have to stay in relationships that cause us harm in order to change our karmic amalgam. But that is a simplistic view of these situations. Buddhism doesn’t see situations so superficially. The important point is to bring forth the wisdom to know what action to take in each circumstance, and for every person, or more accurately every “relationship”, the answer will be different.

What is of ultimate importance is how we grow and develop as a result of our challenges. Changing our heart/mind means developing a profound belief in every person’s Buddhahood. That we are able to do so is not only an expression of our resolve in practice, but also an expression of our trust and respect for all human beings. In the “Devadatta” chapter of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni indicates that though Devadatta made terribly destructive acts against the Sangha, and Shakyamuni Buddha personally against the Buddha’s life, Shakyamuni considers Devadatta a “Good Friend”! How could this be? This is a greatly profound lesson of the many within the Lotus Sutra. As I suggested earlier, the strength of Shakyamuni’s conviction in Tathagata-ness is only made more crystallized by the attacks of the formidable evil intent in Devadatta. No matter how concentrated, complicated, or determined Devadatta’s machinations to destroy Shakyamuni, he was simply unable to effect a crippling blow or to derail the Buddha. And for his

“Good” friendship, Shakyamuni was only fortified by the lack of Devadatta's success as well as even more conviction of his own enlightenment.

It is easy to speak abstractly of love for one’s fellow human beings or love for humanity, but it can be very challenging to have love and compassion for actual individuals. It is only through resolving to transform our selves in order to affect our interpersonal relationships that we can reveal our inherent dignity and become models for bringing people together, which is what the world needs.