

Perceiving Evil and Protecting Good

Good Friends in the Realm of Buddhism

In Buddhism, the terms “good friend” and “evil friend” are used to indicate persons who have some influence, either good or bad, on one’s thinking and Buddhist practice.

Good friends are those who lead one to the correct teaching or help one practice toward enlightenment. They can include Buddhist teachers and fellow practitioners. Evil friends are those who interfere with or obstruct one’s Buddhist practice, leading one away from enlightenment and toward the erroneous or destructive paths, or Dukkha. It is important to be close to good friends and to wisely take care not to be deceived or influenced by evil friends.

The human mind can easily be swayed or shaken. In carrying out Buddhist practice, there is a possibility of giving in to one’s weaknesses and failing to apply oneself, thereby losing sight of the Buddha’s correct teaching. That is why it is essential to have good friends who can inspire one’s resolve and always direct one on the correct path to buddhahood. Nichiren Shonin writes:

“Therefore, the best way to attain buddhahood is to encounter a good friend. How far can our own wisdom take us? If we have even enough wisdom to distinguish hot from cold, we should seek out a good friend.”

With regard to evil friends who can obstruct one’s Buddhist practice, the Shonin quotes the Nirvana Sutra:

“Have no fear of mad elephants. What you should fear are evil friends! Why? Because a mad elephant can only destroy your body; it cannot destroy your mind. But an evil friend can destroy both body and mind. Even if you are killed by a mad elephant, you will not fall into the three evil paths [the realms of hell, hungry spirits, and animals]. But if you are killed by an evil friend, you are certain to fall into them.”

Resolve for Transforming Evil Friends into Good Friends

Not only did the Shonin teach that one should not follow or be influenced by evil friends, he also taught that one should establish resolve strong enough to defeat their attempts to impede one’s Buddhist practice and regard them as opportunities to further advance toward one’s attainment of buddhahood. This is easy to understand and to take for granted that this is a simple matter of conviction. But, this is a profound statement of deep resolve and Buddha-wisdom that is as unshakable as one’s own self.

The stronger one's resolve and practice becomes, the more strongly the three obstacles and four devils and the three powerful enemies under the tutelage of Dairokuten-no-mao, will emerge to interfere. If, however, through summoning even stronger resolve and using the wisdom gained from the Shonin's writings, one can clearly perceive devilish functions for what they are, they will at that point cease to function as devils. Through challenging and overcoming such obstacles based on resolve in your Buddha-eye through the focus provided by your mandala of Gohonzon, you will be able to bring forth from within previously untapped power and tremendous potential, strengthen resolve, and further develop your state of life. The transformation of evil friends into good friends has everything to do with your perception and experience of them, and little if anything to do with them.

In "***The Actions of the Votary of the Lotus Sutra***," the Shonin writes:

"Devadatta was the foremost good friend to Thus Come One Shakyamuni. In this age as well, it is not one's allies but one's powerful enemies who assist one's progress"

, and in the letter titled "***Why No Protection from the Heavenly Gods?***" he states,

"Evil persons too will be good friends to me".

This is due to their inspiration to you to redouble your efforts to be un-influenced by their machinations and delusions.

Strictness toward Slander and Flexibility toward Culture and Customs

Strictly Admonishing Slander of the Law

"Slander of the Law" means maligning, defaming, or speaking ill of the correct Buddhist teaching. The correct teaching means the truth to which the Buddha awakened, the teaching that enables all people to attain buddhahood. It was expounded by Shakyamuni in the Lotus Sutra, the essence of which Nichiren Shonin revealed to be ***NaMuMyoHoRenGeKyo***.

This correct teaching represents a view of life and the human being that regards everyone's life as innately possessing the state of buddhahood and replete with unlimited potential. To oppose and disparage this correct teaching or to manipulate, deceive, or reject it and refuse to accept and understand it, constitutes slander of the Law.

Such slander is an expression of disbelief in, and opposition to the most humane and genuine way of life that aims for the emancipation of self and others to reach full potential, and a peaceful and tranquil society; it is the root cause of Dukkha, unrest, world violence and fear, and should therefore be strictly admonished.

That said, however, one should not reject or exclude people who don't recognize or support one's resolve, nor should one try to force one's beliefs on others. It is through our emulation of Nichiren, our mentor, to act and live as exemplars of the practice in daily life that is the greatest influence we have on others. To be resolute and consistent in our practice is our greatest Bodhisattva task.

During the Shonin's lifetime, the various Buddhist schools spread erroneous doctrines that disparaged the Lotus Sutra, and slander of the Law became widespread. In his treatise "***On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land,***" the Shonin defines slander of the Law as the one evil that is the source of both people's suffering and the instability of society. He strongly advocates building, through resolve in the correct teaching, a peaceful society in which people can feel at ease.

In order to attain buddhahood, it is not enough to simply refrain from committing slander oneself. It is also important to strictly admonish and challenge the slander of others, endeavor to correct them, and free them from the path to suffering. This is the compassionate practice of shakubuku, spreading the teachings while challenging and defeating slander.

Shakubuku should not be attempted until you feel in your practice the depth of unshakable conviction. Shakubuku is meant to be the effort of correction and leadership as exemplified by Nichiren, directed to other Buddhists whose practice has deviated or been falsely influenced by evil friends.

The Shonin teaches, "To hope to attain buddhahood without speaking out against slander is as futile as trying to find water in the midst of fire or fire in the midst of water".

To challenge evil influences that spread slander of the Law serves to empower and increase the virtuous forces of the Buddha and to protect oneself from evil, making the attainment of buddhahood possible.