

Sickness and Faith

Buddhism expounds that human anguish consists of the four sufferings of birth, aging, sickness, and death. We all want to stay healthy forever and never want to experience the suffering of sickness. However, between the time we are born into this world and the time we must encounter death, we all will ultimately experience the suffering of illness, even if we pride ourselves on being extremely healthy.

Nichiren Daishonin states the following in the Gosho, *Curing Illness through Different Teachings such as Hinayana, Mahayana, the Pre-Lotus Sutra, and the Lotus Sutra* (Jibyō daishō gonjitsu imoku):

That is, there are two types of illnesses that afflict humans. The first is illness of the body, which consists of 101 illnesses related to each of [the four elements of] earth, water, fire, and wind. This would amount to a total of 404 illnesses. These illnesses can be cured by one who is not even a Buddha. It is impossible for the likes of Zhishui, Liushui, Jivaka, and Bianque not to be able to cure these with their medicines.

The second type illness of the mind, which arises from [earthly desires caused by] the three poisons [of greed, anger, and stupidity]. There are as many as 84,000 kinds of these illnesses. These illnesses are difficult to cure even by the likes of the two gods [in Brahmanism] and the three hermits and six teachers of the non-Buddhist teachings. (Gosho, p. 1235)

Here, the Daishonin teaches that there are 404 types of human physical illness and that there are 84,000 ailments of the mind, arising from the three poisons.

Nichiren Daishonin explains the various causes and karmic bonds that lead to sickness, citing the following passage from *Great Concentration and Insight* (Maka shikan):

To clarify the causes for illnesses, there are six categories. First are illnesses caused by an imbalance of the four elements. Second are illnesses caused by one's inability to control one's appetite. Third are illnesses caused by an imperfect practice of meditation. Fourth are illnesses caused by demons entering into one's body. Fifth are illnesses caused by the work of devils. Sixth are illnesses caused by the manifestation of one's karma. (Gosho, p. 911)

The first item, imbalance of the four elements, means that our health is impaired when the balance of the four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind, which constitute all phenomena, and the physical entities of people in the universe collapses and leads to irregularities.

The second item, the inability to control one's appetite, refers to illnesses caused by excessive eating and drinking and having unbalanced meals.

The third item, an imperfect practice of meditation, represents ailments arising from internal conflict and imbalance in one's mind and heart, leading to deterioration of both mind and body.

The fourth item, demons entering into one's body, describes ailments caused by evil demons possessing special powers, which cannot be recognized through the eyes and ears of ordinary humans. These evil demons are responsible for infectious diseases that are invisible to the naked eye, calamities, and disasters.

In the fifth item, the work of devils, the term “devils” is translated as “murderers,” “those who take away capabilities and life,” “obstacles,” and “destruction.” These functions rob people of their good causes, their will to live, and their very lives. They prevent the positive functions of the mind and destroy the workings of the head, nerves, and sensitivity, thus causing neurological and psychological diseases.

“Karma” in the sixth item, the manifestation of one’s karma, refers to actions and deeds. The karmic effects of all the thoughts, words, and deeds from infinite past kalpas to the present are etched deeply into our lives. Various illnesses are caused by such causal factors.

In the Gosho, *Reply to Myōshin ama* (Myōshin ama gozen-gohenji), Nichiren Daishonin states the following about curing these diseases:

Your illness must be the work of the Buddha, just as described in the Vimalakirti Sutra (*Jōmyō-kyō*) and the Nirvana Sutra. These sutras describe the reason why those who are ill should be able to attain Buddhahood. Illness can motivate one to pursue the path to supreme enlightenment.

(*Gosho*, p. 900)

When we are leading a tranquil and comfortable daily life, we do not reflect on and look at ourselves. When a serious matter occurs, we finally can come to our senses. Suffering from illness is a means by which the Gohonzon leads us to understand our own karma from the past, strengthen our conviction in the Gohonzon, and reinforce faith and practice, so that we can attain enlightenment.

Therefore, it is essential for us to chant sincere Daimoku, exert our best efforts in our faith and practice, and continue to expiate our negative karma.

High Priest Nichinyo Shonin gave us the following guidance:

We must squarely face the suffering and joy that are before us, and understand suffering for what it is and joy for what it is. When we break through and achieve this understanding, we can clear the path and overcome all things....In other words, this can be established when we sincerely chant Daimoku and achieve the fusion of our faith with the Gohonzon. The powerful self that is established in this way will be able to look upon reality and see both suffering and joy as supreme happiness and experience the joy of being enlightened to the absolute truth of the Law. This joy of being enlightened to the absolute truth of the Law represents the state of life in true happiness for humans.

(*Shingyō yōmon*, vol. 4, p. 58)

Through upholding sincere faith with no doubt in the Gohonzon, we can squarely face all suffering, such as the suffering of illness, overcome it, and conquer it.

Even though you uphold faith in Nichiren Shoshu, you still may have doubts and misgivings. You may think, “Why am I sick when I am exerting my utmost efforts in my practice?” But your correct faith and practice in this lifetime are bringing forth the heavy negative karma from your past and manifesting it in tempered form. Thus, your illness confirms that you are expiating your negative karma. The High Priest explains that you should actually be happy that your past karma is appearing in this life for you to expiate.

Nichiren Daishonin also states:

Illnesses of the sixth category, caused by manifestations of one's negative karma, are the most difficult to cure. Now, karmic illnesses can be minor or grave, so they are various. Of these, the gravest karmic illnesses are caused by slandering the Lotus Sutra. (Gosho, p. 912)

The sixth type, karmic illness, is the most difficult to cure. The Daishonin explains that, in particular, the gravest karmic diseases are those arising from the negative cause of slandering the Lotus Sutra.

However, even these grave illnesses can be cured. The Daishonin states in the Gosho, *Reply to Ōta sa'emon-no-jō* (Ōta sa'emon no jō-gohenji):

The scripture known as the Lotus Sutra is a potent medicine for all illnesses of the body and mind. (Gosho, p. 1222)

Thus, Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo of the Buddhism of the sowing, hidden in the depths of the Lotus Sutra, which was expounded by Nichiren Daishonin, is a tremendously powerful medicine that can cure the karmic illnesses of all people in the Latter Day of the Law.

The Honorable Retired High Priest Nikken Shonin stated:

There are some people who say that when they first embraced true Buddhism and started to chant Daimoku, they began to get ill. These are people who committed karmic offences in their past. Through the benefits of chanting Daimoku, they were able to lessen the severity of their karma. Without it, they may have been destined to fall into hell, or they may have possessed the karma to fall into the world of hunger. In other words, as a result of the benefit of being able to embrace true Buddhism in this lifetime, the karma is manifested at this time as a slight illness. If this illness can be thoroughly cured through faith, it signifies that their karma from the past can be completely eliminated and removed in this lifetime, through the benefit of true Buddhism.

(*Daibyakuho*, No. 444)

As we exert our utmost efforts in our Buddhist practice, not only the suffering of illness, but also various other obstacles and devilish functions will appear. When we earnestly chant Daimoku, make sincere payers to the Gohonzon, and do shakubuku, we will amass benefits that will enable us to eradicate our negative karma.

We possess the precious mission to lead people who are suffering from illnesses as well as other forms of anguish to true Buddhism, through chanting Daimoku to the Gohonzon that is the true object of worship and upholding correct faith and practice.