

Toward a Century of Health: The Wisdom for Leading a Long Life of Good Fortune and Benefit—Part 1 [of 4]

Those Battling Illness Will Attain Buddhahood—Defeating the Devil of Illness with the Lion’s Roar of Nam-myoho-rence-kyo

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Welcome to the study podcast for April. To begin, I’d like to take this opportunity to express my deepest appreciation Mrs. Elizabeth Izumi, who passed away peacefully on February 25. Mrs. Izumi was like a second mother to so many of our members, and she was certainly the mother of Canadian kosen-rufu. We will miss her dearly, but I am confident that she is warmly watching over us and planning her next life, when she will rejoin us in the eternal journey of kosen-rufu.

The month of April is deeply meaningful for the Soka Gakkai. Second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda passed away on April 2, 1958, and on April 28, 1253, Nichiren Daishonin declared Nam-myoho-rence-kyo as the essential teaching in the Latter Day of the Law that enables all people to attain Buddhahood in this lifetime.

This year we commemorated the 800th anniversary of Nichiren Daishonin’s birth date on February 16, and on May 3 we will commemorate the 70th anniversary of President Toda’s inauguration. The vow President Toda made on that day in 1951 to achieve 750,000 member households was accomplished by President Toda and his disciple Daisaku Ikeda through the shared struggle of mentor and disciple united as one.

The SGI study movement has taken a major leap forward since the launch of the Soka Gakkai Global website on November 18, 2020, presenting Sensei’s writings online and designating them as Essential Study Materials. SGI is working toward making all these materials available in French, Chinese, and numerous other languages.

This year, the first SGI Online Study Lecture has been presented by SGI Study Department Leader Masaaki Morinaka. Not only do we have such great opportunities; we can also share them with our friends. There will be another online lecture later this year. Let’s now turn to the lecture we’re studying in April. It’s the first of a series of four lectures titled “Toward a Century of Health: The Wisdom for Leading a Long Life of Good Fortune and Benefit.” This lecture is titled “Those Battling Illness Will Attain

Buddhahood—Defeating the Devil of Illness with the Lion’s Roar of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.” Although this lecture was originally published in September 2019, it is timely that we are studying these lectures now, as we are still struggling with the worldwide pandemic.

Sensei starts by emphasizing health as an essential element of fundamental human rights. The Soka Gakkai’s focus in the aftermath of the Second World War was bringing the light of hope to those who were suffering the most. When criticized as “a gathering of the poor and sick,” President Toda declared proudly: “What’s wrong with being a gathering of the poor and sick? Doesn’t a truly effective religion help those who are suffering the most?”

Sensei then speaks to the additional suffering that arises from illness, which debilitates people and fills them with despair. He states, “A genuine ‘religion for the people’ fights head-on against this negative energy that Buddhism calls ‘the devil of illness,’ giving people the courage and strength to go on living while restoring their human dignity. This is the overall theme of this lecture series, which is illuminated by passages from Nichiren Daishonin’s writings, beginning with the following passage from “The Good Medicine for All Ills”:

Could not this illness . . . be the Buddha’s design, because the Vimalakirti and Nirvana sutras both teach that sick people will surely attain Buddhahood? Illness gives rise to the resolve to attain the way. (WND-1, 937; “The Good Medicine for All Ills”)

Sensei says:

The Daishonin warmly embraces the couple through this letter, telling them that the “five characters of Myoho-renge-kyo” are “good medicine for the ills of the people of Jambudvipa [the entire world]” [LSOC23, 330], adding: “Could not this illness . . . be the Buddha’s design” (WND-1, 937). I am sure the Daishonin’s great compassion relieved their anxiety and brought them profound comfort and peace of mind.

Illness is integral to our existence and essential in our journey to attaining Buddhahood.

The Goshō passage refers to Vimalakīrti, a lay believer at the time of Shakyamuni who exemplified the compassionate spirit of a bodhisattva. Falling ill, Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī asks him what has caused his illness. Vimalakīrti replies: “Because all living beings are sick, therefore I am sick.” Vimalakīrti goes on to state, “The illness of the bodhisattva arises from his great compassion.”

In the Nirvāna Sūtra, Shakyamuni assumes the appearance of a sick person to demonstrate “that sick people will surely attain Buddhahood.”

And in the Lotus Sūtra, it is explained that the Buddha also becomes ill and has worries, just like all people. The important thing is that the power of Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō enables every person to overcome their sufferings without exception. The key is how we face illness, and our attitude in dealing with it.

Many people were motivated to begin practising because of their illness, as Nichiren Daishōnin points out in the well-known statement, “Illness gives rise to the resolve to attain the way.” In the course of our lives, and even though we practise, we will inevitably encounter illness at certain times. It is at such times that we need to confront such challenges by chanting Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō with the determination not to be defeated by it. As Sensei explains:

We can then experience the benefit of seeing sickness, aging, and death for what they are and facing them without fear.

Discussing the fact that the Buddha also had some ills and worries, Mr. Toda said that if the Buddha didn’t experience illness himself, he wouldn’t be relatable to those who were suffering from illness and therefore could not lead them to enlightenment. In this way, he asserted that illness, too, has profound meaning in our lives.

Buddhism views illness as “an innate part of life” (OTT, 174). When we are confronted with illness, we come to understand the importance of health and the preciousness of life. We can gain a deeper appreciation of our own life and mission. In addition, our determination, strong faith, and prayers to battle our illness impart courage and hope to those around us. They demonstrate the nobility of the human spirit. Health and illness are one and inseparable. In Nichiren Buddhism, we can transform illness into mission.

The next Goshō passage is from “Reply to Kyo’o”:

Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō is like the roar of a lion. What sickness can therefore be an obstacle? (WND-1, 412; “Reply to Kyo’o”)

This passage is perhaps one of the best-known and most frequently quoted passages to encourage ourselves and each other, especially when facing serious health challenges. This writing is a declaration of complete assurance to Shijō Kingo and his wife Nichigen-nyō, the parents of the infant Kyo’o, that their daughter will be protected by the power of the Daishōnin’s prayers “every moment of the day” as well as their sincere and resolute prayers. It is an inspiring image of the immeasurable conviction and compassion of the mentor fusing with the hearts of his beloved disciples. Chanting the “lion’s roar” of Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō with the ferocity and absolute resolve to defeat devilish functions gives rise to the power to completely transform our life condition, change poison into medicine, and transform our karma. Sensei declares, “Nothing is a match for the power of the lion’s roar of Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō chanted by Soka mentors and disciples.”

It is at this point in the lecture that Sensei makes the very important distinction between illness and the devil of illness. Illness is universal and inescapable. The devil of illness is the feeling of despair that can be even more debilitating than the illness itself, potentially leading one to give up and lose the strength to go on living. Sensei states:

We need to see this devilish aspect of illness for what it is and courageously combat it through the power of our Buddhist faith and practice. We must resolve not to be defeated by it. Through battling and triumphing over the devil of illness, we can reveal our Buddhahood.

Sensei describes his own experience of being afflicted with tuberculosis when he was young. While fighting wholeheartedly for kosen-rufu as Mr. Toda’s disciple, he was constantly suffering from low-grade fever and chronic pain. He was not depressed nor discouraged, but he was bitterly frustrated and wanted to be healthy and strong. He describes how Mr. Toda helped him awaken the lion’s roar within himself:

I remember being scolded by Mr. Toda one day as I was making frantic efforts to help him resolve his business difficulties amid the postwar recession. Perhaps

noticing how pale and exhausted I was, he said: “Daisaku! You haven’t got an ounce of life force! If your life force is weak, you’ll be defeated.”

He led me over to the Gohonzon, sat down with me, and chanted Nam-myoho-rence-kyo with a force that literally seemed to batter the devil of illness into submission. His chanting truly was a lion’s roar.

Inspired by my mentor’s tough love, I roused fresh courage and summoned forth the boundless life force of a charging lion. In this way, my mentor made it possible for me to defeat the devil of illness and forge a life of health and longevity so that I could fulfill my mission for kosen-rufu. For this, I am eternally grateful to him. In *The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings*, the Daishonin explains the term “lion’s roar,” saying: “The ‘roar’ is the sound of the teacher and the disciples chanting in unison” (OTT, 111). The Soka Gakkai has overcome every form of adversity through the united prayers of mentors and disciples chanting the lion’s roar of Nam-myoho-rence-kyo.

This dramatic scene tells us everything we need to know in order to conquer every kind of suffering. Once we arouse deep faith and chant daimoku with the lion’s roar, we can conquer all devilish functions, no matter what they are, and live with confidence, looking forward and opening the way for all people to overcome their sufferings and create value. Sensei states:

As long as we continue to chant the lion’s roar of Nam-myoho-rence-kyo, then no matter what illness, hardship, or misfortune we face, we can “move about without fear like the lion king.” We will experience a state of complete happiness and freedom in accord with the Lotus Sutra passage that says “living beings enjoy themselves at ease” (LSOC16, 272).

We learn from Nichiren Daishonin the uncompromising stance of rebuking the devil of illness, as illustrated in the lecture by the example of Nanjo Tokimitsu. The Daishonin’s own battle with illness in the last years of his life demonstrates this spirit. Sensei states, “Through his example of living dauntlessly to the very end, the Daishonin gave countless others the courage to go on living. This is the natural behavior of the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law.”

How fortunate we are to be able to be able to fight together with our mentor, who continues to encourage us! Let’s pray for Sensei’s and Mrs. Ikeda’s good health as we

advance toward May 3 and toward the 40th anniversary of Sensei's second visit to Canada in June. Thank you for your courageous and steady efforts to encourage one person after another.