

Nichiren Shu Buddhist Temple of UK Newsletter

Happy New Year!

This year is the year of the Cow. The character of the Cow is usually steady, simple and peaceful; but once angered it has the tendency to be rough and violent. Pay attention to the world, since last year we have encountered a global economic crisis which has slowed business and increased unemployment, and also a dispute between Israel and Palestine. A cloud of uneasiness is spreading all over the world. Due to the invention of such conveniences as aircraft, the internet, mobile phones etc., we feel that the world is becoming smaller than its actual size. We feel that if something happens, the effect spreads throughout the world immediately - even a tiny event that occurs in a country far away will affect us. Thanks to these inventions we get to know useful information, along with extra information which we don't need and that bothers us. Under such a situation, how should we, as Nichiren Shu Buddhists, live every day? I would like to introduce you to Nichiren Shonin's words:

"It is useless to stack up a pile of treasures in your storehouse if you are poor in health. Therefore, the value of a healthy body is more precious than treasures in the storehouse. At the same time, however, a healthy body means nothing if your mind is not pure. This is why we can say that our most precious treasure is our mind itself. Upon reading this letter, please try to accumulate the treasure of your mind."

"If the minds of living beings become impure, their land also becomes impure. If their minds are pure, their land is also pure. But there are not two lands, pure or impure in the world. The differences depend only on the good or evil of our mind. It is the same manner with a Buddha and an ordinary being. When we are deluded, one is called an ordinary being, but when enlightened, one is called a Buddha. This is similar to a tarnished mirror that will shine like a jewel when polished. A mind clouded by the illusions of the inborn darkness of life is like a tarnished mirror, but if you polish it, it is sure to become like a clear mirror, reflecting the essential suchness of phenomena and reality. Arouse deep faith, and polish your mirror day and night steadily. How should you polish it? Only by chanting Namu Myoho Renge Kyo; this is called 'polishing'"

With this teaching, please encourage and motivate your mind by yourself for your daily life, practice and study to achieve your goal. In closing, I will pray and wish for all of you - Happiness, Health and Prosperity.

Gassho, Rev. Kanto Tsukamoto.

In the last Newsletter, I introduced the "King of Hell" and I had many reactions. Buddhism is a compassionate teaching. Therefore, Buddhism surely prepares us a "helping hand", in all circumstances - even hell. There is a popular Japanese novel which shows this compassion. I would like to introduce a profound story written by Ryunosuke Akutagawa (1892-1927), the greatest novelist in Japan. This is a very short story, so please read slowly, while imagining each scene and if you have time,

please read it repeatedly. You will be able to grasp the profound meaning of Buddhism

""The Spider's Thread""

One day, the Lord Buddha was taking a stroll beside the Lotus Pond in Buddha World. The lotus blossoms were the colour of precious white jade, and from the golden stamens in their centres, an exquisite fragrance wafted into the air. It was morning in the Buddha World.

Presently, the Lord Buddha paused by the side of the pond and chanced to glance down between the lotus leaves that covered its surface. Now the Lotus Pond in Buddha world happens to be directly above the nethermost regions of Hell, so a panorama of the Stygian River and the Mountain of Needles is as visible through the crystal clear waters as if one were peering through a pane of glass into a peep show.

Just then the Lord Buddha caught sight of a man named Kandata writhing about with the other sinners in the depths of Hell. This Kandata was a notorious thief, a perpetrator of countless crimes from murder to arson. Nevertheless, he had performed one good deed. Once, when Kandata was passing through a forest, he noticed a little spider crawling by the wayside. Kandata was about to crush it with his foot when he suddenly changed his mind. "No! It may be very small, but this is a living creature and to take its life thoughtlessly would be cruel, to say the least." And so, he did not kill the spider but let it live.

While the Lord Buddha was observing how things were in Hell, he remembered that Kandata had spared the life of the spider. So, as a reward for that single good deed, he decided to rescue this man from Hell if it were at all possible. As luck would have it he looked about him and noticed a Buddha World spider spinning a beautiful silver web on a jade green lotus leaf. The Lord Buddha lifted the spider's thread gently and let it down between the immaculate white lotus flowers to the bottom of Hell.

This is the Lake of Blood in the bowels of Hell, and here is Kandata, bobbing up to the surface then going under, together with the other sinners. There is nothing but darkness whichever way you look, except for a vague glimmer that appears at intervals out of the darkness - the glimmer of the needles on the terrible Mountain of Needles. It is as forlorn a scene as there ever was. Besides, it is as silent as the grave, the only sound being the occasional feeble sigh of a sinner. For those who fall down to these depths have already passed through all of Hell's torments and are so weary they have not even the strength to utter a wail. Thus it was hardly surprising that the monstrous their Kandata, like the rest, merely squirmed like a half-dead frog as he choked in the lake.

Just then Kandata happened to raise his head, and looking up at the sky above the Lake of Blood, what should he see gliding down through the silent darkness but a silver spider's thread descending from the heavens far, far above - a glistening gossamer filament coming straight towards him, secretly, as if to avoid attracting attention. When he saw this, Kandata clapped his hands for joy in spite of himself. By taking hold of the thread and climbing all the way up he was certain he could escape from Hell! Hey, with luck, might he not even climb right up into the Buddha World

itself, no longer to be driven up onto the Mountain of Needles or be ducked in the Lake of Blood?

So Kandata grabbed hold of the silver thread and began hauling himself up, hand over hand, with all his strength. Being a notorious thief, he was, of course, used to this sort of thing, and had had plenty of practice.

The distance between Hell and the Buddha World, however, is tens of thousands of leagues, so no matter how you may hurry, it is not easy to reach the top. After he had been climbing for a long while, even Kandata became fatigued and had no more strength to pull himself up. There was nothing for it but to take a brief respite, and as he hung there on the thread, resting, he glanced down below him.

Whereupon he saw that his desperate climb had been worth the effort, for the Lake of Blood he had left a while ago was already invisible in the darkness. And as for the faintly gleaming Mountain of Needles, it was also below him. If he went on climbing thus, his escape from Hell would be easier than he had supposed. "I've done it! I've done it!" he shouted, twisting the spider's thread around both of his hands and laughing out loud for the first time in years.

Then, what did he suddenly see way down below but countless sinners climbing up after him on the thread like a procession of ants, hauling themselves up just as intently as he had. Kandata was horrified and frightened, and for some time he remained with his big mouth open like an idiot with only his eyes moving. How could that slender spider's thread, which he alone might quite easily break, sustain the weight of all those people? If it should snap, he, who had managed to climb all this way, would fall headlong back into Hell with the others. What a disaster that would be! In the meantime, the sinners - not merely hundreds, or even thousands - were swarming up out of the depths of the Lake of Blood and arduously climbing up the slender shining thread one after another. Something had to be done about it straight away or the thread would surely give way.

So Kandata bawled, "Hey, you sinners! This spider's thread is mine! Who told you you could come up it!? Get off! Get off!"

That's when it happened. The spider's thread that had been perfectly all right until then suddenly snapped just where Kandata was hanging onto it. There was nothing Kandata could do. Before you could say "knife" he was flying through the air, spinning like a top, falling head over heels down, down into the depths of the darkness. Soon there was nothing to be seen but a short length of the Buddha World spider thread hanging, slender and gleaming, in the moonless, starless sky.

Standing beside the Lotus Pond in the Buddha World, the Lord Buddha observed it all from beginning to end, and when finally Kandata had sunk, like a stone, to the bottom of the Lake of Blood, a look of sadness crossed his countenance as he resumed his stroll. How piteous it must have seemed to the Lord Buddha Kandata's heartlessness in desiring to save only his own skin, and his just punishment.

The flowers in the Lotus Pond of the Buddha World were not in the least affected by any of these events. Those jewel-like white blossoms swayed their calyxes to and fro

at the feet of the Lord Buddha, and from their golden stamens an exquisite fragrance kept wafting into the air. It was almost noon in the Buddha world.

How was this story? In the story, the Buddha tried to rescue Kandata, a villain who is beyond salvation from hell because he did only one good virtue of saving a spider's life. This shows that all living beings have a heart of compassion, the "seed of Buddha-nature". However, without awakening the seed by oneself and growing the seed, the seed will be easily covered and hidden by the deep greed or ego in our mind. We will become more greedy and egocentric and will not awaken even if we have the seed of the Buddha nature. After all, by greedy ego, we will fall into deep darkness involving others like Kandata. However, the Buddha surely prepares us a "helping hand" in all circumstances. Whether you can notice it or not, is up to your faith. If you notice, you will be able to terminate your troubles, but if not you will have troubles constantly until knowing the seed of the Buddha nature in your mind.

In this story, the Buddha extended a helping hand to Kandata with the spider's thread from the Buddha World. Unfortunately, the spider's thread seemed to refuse Kandata entry to the Buddha World directly because of his egotistic mind. After all, he was not able to move up to a better world by himself.

Do you know that we, living beings, are not only able to give peace to deceased spirits but also save them from suffering situations? As you know, in Nichiren Shu, we hold Memorial Services, O-Higan Segaki Service and O-bon Segaki Service. These Services are to save suffering spirits. Instead of the deceased spirits themselves, their family or friends who had a relation with them will be able to save the deceased spirits from suffering situations through holding these Services. According to Buddhist tradition, after the Service if you feel peace or relief, it implies gratitude from the spirits because they received peace and pleasure from the Service. But if you don't feel any peace, they may not have received the merit properly. Also, if your business or plans do not go through smoothly or your mind doesn't feel peace or ease all the time, it is regarded as a message from the suffering spirits because of the lack of help.

Usually we cannot see the spirits, but they can see us. Buddhism has prepared not only ways of saving suffering people, but also spirits as well based on the Buddha's teachings, phenomenon and experiences throughout the 2,500 years of Buddhist history. In Buddhism there is always hope and wisdom to construct a true peaceful world physically and spiritually. The foundation is the teaching of the Lotus Sutra and practicing Odaimoku.

The story of "The Spider's Thread", which you have just read, is very famous; voted as one of the best five novels by the Japanese people. The author, Ryunosuke Akutagawa was a Nichiren Buddhist. He left many works with a Buddhist flavour; this is a masterpiece in his collection of works: describing a human's greedy desire and ugly ego and how humans ruin both themselves and others too. His grave is located in the Nichiren Shu Temple, Jigenji in Tokyo, Japan. His Buddhist Name is Beautiful Wirings House Ryu-Kai (his given name) Sun Noble Lay Buddhist Priest.

Gassho