Repaying Debts of Gratitude

Nichiren Daishonin spoke about the debts of gratitude, which he summarized as four (1). The first is the debt one has with all living beings, about whom he wrote “Were it not for them, one would find it impossible to make the vow to save innumerable living beings.” (2) The second is the debt one has with one’s mother and father, because “to be born into the six paths one must have parents.” (3) The third is the debt owed to one’s sovereign, who we currently identify with the people, thanks to whom “one can warm one’s body in the three kinds of heavenly light and sustain one’s life with the five kinds of grains that grow on earth.” (4) The fourth is the debt of gratitude owed to the three treasures: the Buddha, Nichiren Daishonin; the Law, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo; and the sangha, or the harmonious community of believers.

One who studies the teachings of Buddhism must not fail to repay the four debts of gratitude.

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The fourth is the debt of gratitude to the Three Treasures. [ ... ] Even if we should employ all the surfaces of the worlds in the ten directions for paper, and, with these, set down expressions of gratitude, how could we possibly repay our debt to the Buddha? Concerning the debt owed to the Law, the Law is the teacher of all Buddhas. It is because of the Law that the Buddhas are worthy of respect. Therefore, those who wish to repay their debt to the Buddha must first repay the debt they owe to the Law. 5

The inner, inherent power of human beings that drives us towards goodness is, from the point of view of the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin, the life force that derives from our Buddhahood and makes us strive for our own happiness and that of others. How can we become aware of this innate power so as to always be able to move forward, in a continuous and unlimited way, and create a new era? The most important thing is to live with a sense of gratitude and a positive outlook. More specifically, to acknowledge the debts of gratitude that bind us to others and endeavour to repay what others have done for us.

When we live with this sense of gratitude, we are never susceptible to stagnation. Living with the firm determination to be grateful to our parents, teachers and all those who have helped us become who we are today can act as a driving force for our self-improvement. The desire not to disappoint those who have shaped us can keep us on the right path throughout our life. And when we face difficulties, thinking of those who have helped or supported us in some way may be sufficient for a renewed fighting spirit to arise in our hearts. Gratitude is a source of powerful human strength.

Those who have no appreciation, on the other hand, lead a dark life and lack in joy, because they destroy the essence of what defines them as human beings.

Therefore, Nichiren Daishonin writes: “One who studies the teachings of Buddhism must not fail to repay the four debts of gratitude.” In numerous writings, he emphasizes that repaying debts of gratitude is the essential way of life of a Buddhist practitioner.

My mentor Josei Toda, second president of the Soka Gakkai, once said: “When we look at the world today, we see that there are very few people who show due appreciation to others. As a result, society is affected by disputes, and people walk through life with bitterness and resentment. If we want to change this, we must spread the Mystic Law, the ‘single vehicle’ for the attainment of Buddhahood, and encourage people to base their lives on it.” 6, 7

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2) Ib.
3) Ib., P. 42.
4) Ib.
5) Ib., P. 41-43.