

## August Discussion Topic – The Three Obstacles and Four Devils

The Buddhist concept of the “three obstacles and four devils” (Jpn. *sansho shima*) teaches us how to win over challenges. The ‘obstacles’ and ‘devils’ are functions that appear within us and in our environment. They try to hamper and undermine the high, positive life-state that we have built up through our practice. They weaken our spirit to fight for our own happiness and that of others, leaving us with diminished courage and wisdom. Nichiren Daishonin encourages his disciples in various letters to view these hindrances as obstacles on the path to Buddhahood: “As practice progresses and understanding grows, the three obstacles and four devils emerge in confusing form, vying with one another to interfere ... One should be neither influenced nor frightened by them” (WND-I, 501)

The three obstacles are: **1. The obstacle of earthly desires**, that appears when a person’s spirit or will is at its most vulnerable. The three poisons of greed, anger and foolishness are to be found here, as well as arrogance, doubt and distrust. **2. The obstacle of karma**, that arises from wrong behaviour. This obstacle can be caused by a family member, partner or children. The behaviour of our partner or children is, in a way, the effect of our own deeds. **3. The obstacle of retribution**, that is deeply rooted in a person’s karma and arises from karmic retribution for causes created in previous existences. The country, the society, and the family into which we are born are the result of karmic retribution.

The four devils are four functions that undermine and impede a practitioner, erasing the benefits of Buddhist practice. They are: **1. The hindrance of earthly desires**, hindrances arising from greed, anger and foolishness. **2. The hindrance of the five components**<sup>1</sup>, hindrances caused by one’s own physical and mental functions. **3. The hindrance of death**, one’s own death obstructing one’s Buddhist practice or doubts arising from the death of others. **4. The devil king**, hindrances regarded as acts of the ‘devil king of the sixth heaven’ who is said to assume various forms or take possession of others in order to induce a person to stop practising Buddhism. This last hindrance is regarded as the most difficult to overcome.

The ‘true identity’ of devilish functions is the fundamental darkness or ignorance that exists inherently within our lives. Fundamental darkness implies ignorance about the Mystic Law and the dignity of our lives. It seeks to deny the noble potential for Buddhahood that every human being possesses.

More important than wondering what category of obstacle or devil our problems fall into is to recognize those things that hinder our Buddhist practice and challenge them with faith, prayer and action. We can become absolutely happy through learning how to overcome our inner darkness or ignorance.

1. Are you able to recognize your obstacles and see them as an opportunity to grow, or do they hold you back from advancing?
2. Do you have an experience about how you overcame an obstacle, and what that taught you?

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<sup>1</sup> The five components are: 1. Form: the body and the five sense organs (sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch). 2. Perception: the receiving and integrating of information through the mind which functions as the sixth sense. 3. Conception: the creating of ideas. 4. Volition: the motivation to act based on information and ideas. 5. Consciousness: the discernment from which perception, conception and volition arise.