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The Universal Salty Taste



THERE are six kinds of flavors. The first is subtle, the second, salty, the third, pungent, the fourth, sour, the fifth, sweet, and the sixth, bitter. Even if one were to prepare a feast of a hundred flavors, if the single flavor of salt were missing, it would be no feast for a great king. Without salt, even the delicacies of land and sea are tasteless.

The ocean has eight mysterious qualities. First, it gradually becomes deeper. Second, being deep, its bottom is hard to fathom. Third, its salty taste is the same everywhere. Fourth, its ebb and flow follows certain rules. Fifth, it contains various treasure storehouses. Sixth, creatures of great size exist and dwell in it. Seventh, it refuses to house corpses. Eighth, it takes in all rivers and heavy rainfall without either increasing or decreasing.

[The Nirvana Sutra] compares “it gradually becomes deeper” to the Lotus Sutra leading everyone, from ordinary people who lack understanding to sages who possess it, to attain the Buddha way. The reason [the sutra uses the metaphor] “being deep, its bottom is hard to fathom” is that the realm of the Lotus Sutra can only be understood and shared between Buddhas, while those at the stage of near-perfect enlightenment or below are unable to master it. “Its salty taste is the same everywhere” com-

pares all rivers, which contain no salt, to all sutras other than the Lotus, which offer no way to attain enlightenment. [The Nirvana Sutra] compares the water of all the rivers flowing into the sea and becoming salty to the people of different capacities instructed through the various provisional teachings who attain the Buddha way when they take faith in the Lotus Sutra. It compares “its ebb and flow follows certain rules” to upholders of the Mystic Law who even though they were to lose their lives would attain the stage of non-regression. It compares “it contains various treasure storehouses” to the countless practices and good deeds of all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and the blessings of the various paramitas being contained in the Mystic Law. The reason for “creatures of great size exist and dwell in it” is that, because the Buddhas and bodhisattvas possess great wisdom, they are called “creatures of great size,” and that their great bodies, great aspiring minds, great distinguishing features, great evil-conquering force, great preaching, great authority, great transcendental powers, great compassion, and great pity all arise naturally from the Lotus Sutra. The reason for “it refuses to house corpses” is that with the Lotus Sutra one can free oneself for all eternity from slander and incorrigible disbelief. The reason for “without either increasing or decreas-

ing” is that the heart of the Lotus Sutra is the universality of the Buddha nature in all living beings.

The brine in a tub or jar of pickled vines ebbs and flows in accordance with the brine of the sea.¹ One who upholds the Lotus Sutra and is subjected to imprisonment is like the salt in a tub or jar, while the Thus Come One Shakyamuni who freed himself from the burning house² is like the salt of the sea. To condemn one who upholds the Lotus is to condemn the Thus Come One Shakyamuni. How aston-

ished Brahma, Shakra, and the four heavenly kings must be! If not now, when will the ten demon daughters’ vow to split the head of one who persecutes a follower of the Lotus into seven pieces³ be carried out?

Ajatashatru, who had imprisoned King Bimbisara, suddenly broke out in virulent sores in his present existence. How can one who has imprisoned an upholder of the Lotus not suffer from virulent sores in this existence?

Nichiren



Background

The date and recipient of this letter are unknown, as are the reasons for its writing. The statements “One who upholds the Lotus Sutra and is subjected to imprisonment” and “To condemn one who upholds the Lotus” indicate that Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter at a time when he or his disciples were undergoing persecution. Several views exist concerning the year of its writing. One is that it was written in 1261 when the Daishonin was in exile in Izu; another, in 1271 when he was in exile on Sado Island; and a third, in 1279, during the worst period of the Atsuhara Persecution. Of these, 1261 seems most likely.

In this letter, the Daishonin says that there are six kinds of flavors, of which salt is the most important. Without salt, any food will be bland. In employing

this simile, the Daishonin is indicating that none of the sutras assume their true significance unless they are based on the truth revealed in the Lotus Sutra. Then he cites the eight mystic qualities of the ocean enumerated in the Nirvana Sutra. But while the Nirvana Sutra actually applies these qualities to itself, the Daishonin asserts that it is using them to praise the superiority of the Lotus Sutra.

In the final section, the Daishonin compares the salt in a jar or tub of pickled vines to a follower of the Lotus Sutra, and the salt of the ocean, to Shakyamuni Buddha. The brine in a jar or tub ebbs and flows exactly as the ocean does, and by analogy, to imprison a votary of the Lotus Sutra is to imprison Shakyamuni Buddha.

Notes

1. In the pickling process, salt is added to a jar of vines to draw out their water. This salty water is said to increase and decrease in accord with the rise and fall of the ocean tides.

2. “Burning house” refers to the passage

from the “Simile and Parable” chapter of the Lotus Sutra that reads, “There is no safety in the threefold world; it is like a burning house.”

3. This vow is made in chapter 26 of the Lotus Sutra.