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The Four Debts of Gratitude



CONCERNING my present exile,¹ there are two important matters that I must mention. One is that I feel immense joy. The reason is that this world is called the saha world, saha meaning endurance. This is why the Buddha is also called “One Who Can Endure.” In the saha world,² there are one billion Mount Sumerus, one billion suns and moons, and one billion groups of four continents. Among all these worlds, it was in the world at the center—with its Mount Sumeru, sun and moon, and four continents—that the Buddha made his advent. Japan is a tiny island country situated in a remote corner of that world, to the northeast of the country in which the Buddha appeared.

Since all the lands in the ten directions, with the exception of this saha world, are pure lands, their people, being gentlehearted, neither abuse nor hate the worthies and sages. In contrast, this world is inhabited by people who were rejected from the pure lands in the ten directions. They have committed the ten evil acts or the five cardinal sins, slandered the worthies and sages, and have been unfilial to their fathers and mothers or disrespectful to the monks. For these offenses they fell into the three evil paths, and only after dwelling there for countless kalpas were they reborn in this world. Yet the resi-

due of the evil karma formed in their previous existences has not yet been eradicated, and they still tend to perpetrate the ten evil acts or the five cardinal sins, to revile the worthies and sages, and to be undutiful to their fathers and mothers or irreverent toward the monks.

For these reasons, when the Thus Come One Shakyamuni made his advent in this world, some people offered him food into which they had mixed poison. Others tried to harm him by means of swords and staves, mad elephants, lions, fierce bulls, or savage dogs. Still others charged him with violating women, condemned him as a man of lowly status, or accused him of killing. Again, some, when they encountered him, covered their eyes to avoid seeing him, and others closed their doors and shuttered their windows. Still others reported to the kings and ministers that he held erroneous views and was given to slandering exalted personages. These incidents are described in the Great Collection Sutra, the Nirvana Sutra, and other scriptures. The Buddha was innocent of all such evil deeds. Yet this world is peculiar or deficient in that those with bad karma are born into it and inhabit it in great numbers. Moreover, the devil king of the sixth heaven, scheming to prevent the people of this world from leaving it

for the pure lands, seizes every opportunity to carry out his perverse acts.

It appears that his scheming is ultimately intended to prevent the Buddha from expounding the Lotus Sutra. The reason is that the nature of this devil king is to rejoice at those who create the karma of the three evil paths and to grieve at those who form the karma of the three good paths.³ Yet he does not lament so greatly over those who form the karma of the three good paths, but he sorrows indeed at those who aspire to the three vehicles. Again, he may not sorrow so much over those who seek to attain the three vehicles, but he grieves bitterly at those who form the karma to become Buddhas and avails himself of every opportunity to obstruct them. He knows that those who hear even a single sentence or phrase of the Lotus Sutra will attain Buddhahood without fail and, exceedingly distressed by this, contrives various plots and restrains and persecutes believers in an attempt to make them abandon their faith.

Although the age in which the Buddha lived was certainly a defiled one, the five impurities had only just begun to manifest themselves; in addition, the devil stood in awe of the Buddha's powers. Yet, even in a time when the people's greed, anger, foolishness, and false views were still not rampant, a group of Brahmans of the Bamboo Staff school killed the Venerable Maudgalyayana, who was known as the foremost in transcendental powers; and King Ajatashatru, by releasing a mad elephant, threatened the life of the only one in all the threefold world who is worthy of honor.⁴ Devadatta killed the nun Utpalavarna, who had attained the state of arhat; and the Venerable Kokalika spread evil rumors about Shariputra, who was renowned as the foremost in wisdom. How much worse things became in the world as the five impurities steadily increased!

And now, in the latter age, hatred and jealousy toward those who believe even slightly in the Lotus Sutra will be all the more terrible. Thus the Lotus Sutra states, "Since hatred and jealousy toward this sutra abound even when the Thus Come One is in the world, how much more will this be so after his passing?"⁵ When I read this passage for the first time, I did not think that the situation would be as bad as it predicts. Now I am struck by the unfailing accuracy of the Buddha's words, especially in light of my present circumstances.

I, Nichiren, do not observe the precepts with my body. Nor is my heart free from the three poisons. But since I believe in this [Lotus] sutra myself and also enable others to form a relationship with it, I had thought that perhaps society would treat me rather gently. Probably because the world has entered into the latter age, even monks who have wives and children have followers, as do priests who eat fish and fowl. I have neither wife nor children, nor do I eat fish or fowl. I have been blamed merely for trying to propagate the Lotus Sutra. Though I have neither wife nor child, I am known throughout the country as a monk who transgresses the code of conduct, and though I have never killed even a single ant or mole cricket, my bad reputation has spread throughout the realm. This may well resemble the situation of Shakyamuni Buddha, who was slandered by a multitude of non-Buddhists during his lifetime.

It seems that, solely because my faith in the Lotus Sutra accords slightly more with its teachings than does the faith of others, evil demons must have possessed their bodies and be causing them to feel hatred toward me. I am nothing but a lowly and ignorant monk without precepts. Yet, when I think that such a person should be mentioned in the Lotus Sutra, which was expounded more than two thousand years ago, and

that the Buddha prophesied that that person would encounter persecution, I cannot possibly express my joy.

It is already twenty-four or twenty-five years since I began studying Buddhism. Yet I have believed wholeheartedly in the Lotus Sutra only for the past six or seven years. Moreover, although I had faith in the sutra, because I was negligent and because of my studies and the interruptions of mundane affairs, each day I would recite only a single scroll, a chapter, or the title. Now, however, for a period of more than 240 days—from the twelfth day of the fifth month of last year to the sixteenth day of the first month of this year—I think I have practiced the Lotus Sutra twenty-four hours each day and night. I say so because, having been exiled on the Lotus Sutra's account, I now read and practice it continuously, whether I am walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. For anyone born human, what greater joy could there be?

It is the way of ordinary people that, even though they spur themselves on to arouse the aspiration for enlightenment and wish for happiness in the next life, they exert themselves no more than one or two out of all the hours of the day, and this only after reminding themselves to do so. As for myself, I read the Lotus Sutra without having to remember to, and practice it even when I do not read its words aloud.

During the course of countless kalpas, while transmigrating through the six paths and the four forms of birth, I may at times have risen in revolt, committed theft, or broken into others' homes at night and, on account of these offenses, been convicted by the ruler and condemned to exile or death. This time, however, it is because I am so firmly resolved to propagate the Lotus Sutra that people with evil karma have brought false charges against me; hence my exile. Surely this will work in my

favor in future lifetimes. In this latter age, there cannot be anyone else who upholds the Lotus Sutra twenty-four hours of the day and night without making a deliberate effort to do so.

There is one other thing for which I am most grateful. While transmigrating in the six paths for the duration of countless kalpas, I may have encountered a number of sovereigns and become their favorite minister or regent. If so, I must have been granted fiefs and accorded treasures and stipends. Never once, however, did I encounter a sovereign in whose country the Lotus Sutra had spread, so that I could hear its name, practice it and, on that very account, be slandered by other people and have the ruler send me into exile. The Lotus Sutra states, "As for this Lotus Sutra, throughout immeasurable numbers of lands one cannot even hear its name, much less be able to see it, accept and embrace, read and recite it."⁶ Thus those people who slandered me and the ruler [who had me banished] are the very persons to whom I owe the most profound debt of gratitude.

One who studies the teachings of Buddhism must not fail to repay the four debts of gratitude. According to the Contemplation on the Mind-Ground Sutra, the first of the four debts is that owed to all living beings. Were it not for them, one would find it impossible to make the vow to save innumerable living beings. Moreover, but for the evil people who persecute bodhisattvas, how could those bodhisattvas increase their merit?

The second of the four debts is that owed to one's father and mother. To be born into the six paths, one must have parents. If one is born into the family of a murderer, a thief, a violator of the rules of proper conduct, or a slanderer of the Law, then even though one may not commit these offenses oneself, one in effect forms the same karma as those

who do. As for my parents in this lifetime, however, they not only gave me birth but made me a believer in the Lotus Sutra. Thus I owe my present father and mother a debt far greater than I would had I been born into the family of Brahma, Shakra, one of the four heavenly kings, or a wheel-turning king, and so inherited the threefold world or the four continents, and been revered by the four kinds of believers in the worlds of human and heavenly beings.

The third is the debt owed to one's sovereign. It is thanks to one's sovereign that one can warm one's body in the three kinds of heavenly light⁷ and sustain one's life with the five kinds of grain⁸ that grow on earth. Moreover, in this lifetime, I have taken faith in the Lotus Sutra and encountered a ruler who will enable me to free myself in my present existence from the sufferings of birth and death. Thus, how can I dwell on the insignificant harm that he has done me and overlook my debt to him?

The fourth is the debt owed to the three treasures. When the Thus Come One Shakyamuni was engaged in bodhisattva practices for countless kalpas, he gathered all of the good fortune and virtue he had gained thereby, divided it into sixty-four parts, and took on their merit. Of these sixty-four, he reserved only one part for himself. The remaining sixty-three parts he left behind in this world, making a vow as follows: "There will be an age when the five impurities will become rampant, erroneous teachings will flourish, and slanderers will fill the land. At that time, because the innumerable benevolent guardian deities will be unable to taste the flavor of the Law, their majesty and strength will diminish. The sun and moon will lose their brightness, the heavenly dragons will not send down rain, and the earthly deities will decrease the fertility of the soil. The roots and

stalks, branches and leaves, flowers and fruit will all lose their medicinal properties as well as the seven flavors.⁹ Even those who became kings because they had observed the ten good precepts in previous lifetimes will grow in greed, anger, and foolishness. The people will cease to be dutiful to their parents, and the six kinds of relatives¹⁰ will fall into discord. At such a time, my disciples will consist of unlearned people without precepts. For this reason, even though they shave their heads, they will be forsaken by the tutelary deities and left without any means of subsistence. It is in order to sustain these monks and nuns [that I now leave these sixty-three parts behind]."

Moreover, as for the benefits that the Buddha had attained as a result of his practices, he divided them into three parts, of which he himself made use of only two. For this reason, although he was to have lived in this world until the age of 120, he passed away after eighty years, bequeathing the remaining forty years of his life span to us.¹¹

Even if we should gather all the water of the four great oceans to wet inkstones, burn all the trees and plants to make ink sticks, collect the hairs of all beasts for writing brushes, 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.

As for the debt owed to the Buddhist Order, both the treasure of the Buddha and the treasure of the Law are invariably perpetuated by the Order. To illustrate, without firewood, there can be no fire, and if there is no earth,

trees and plants cannot grow. Likewise, even though Buddhism existed, without the members of the Order who studied it and passed it on, it would never have been transmitted throughout the two thousand years of the Former and Middle Days into the Latter Day of the Law. Accordingly, the Great Collection Sutra states: "Suppose that, in the last of the five five-hundred-year periods, there should be someone who harasses unlearned monks without precepts by accusing them of some offense. You should know that this person is extinguishing the great torch of Buddhism." Therefore, the debt we owe to the Order is difficult to recompense.

Thus it is imperative that one repay one's debt of gratitude to the three treasures. In ancient times, there were sages such as the boy Snow Mountains, Bodhisattva Ever Wailing, Bodhisattva Medicine King, and King Universal Brightness, all of whom [offered their lives in order to make such repayment]. The first offered his body as food to a demon. The second sold his own blood and marrow. The third burned his arms, and the fourth was ready to part with his head. Ordinary people in this latter age, however, though receiving the benefits of the three treasures, completely neglect to repay them. How, then, can they attain the Buddha way? The Contemplation on the Mind-Ground, the Brahma Net, and other sutras state that those who study Buddhism and receive the precepts of perfect and immediate enlightenment must repay the four debts of gratitude without fail. I am but an ignorant ordinary person made of flesh and blood; I have not rid myself of even a fraction of the three categories of illusion. Yet, on account of the Lotus Sutra, I have been reviled, slandered, attacked with swords and staves, and sent into exile. In light of these persecutions, I believe I may be likened to the great sages who burned their arms, crushed their

marrow, or did not begrudge being beheaded. This is what I mean by immense joy.

The second of the two important matters is that I feel intense grief. The fourth volume of the Lotus Sutra states: "If there should be an evil person who, his mind destitute of goodness, should for the space of a kalpa appear in the presence of the Buddha and constantly curse and revile the Buddha, that person's offense would still be rather light. But if there were a person who spoke only one evil word to curse or defame the lay persons or monks or nuns who read and recite the Lotus Sutra, then his offense would be very grave."¹² When I read this and similar passages, my belief is aroused, sweat breaks out from my body, and tears fall from my eyes like rain. I grieve that, by being born in this country, I have caused so many of its people to create the worst karma possible in a lifetime. Those who beat and struck Bodhisattva Never Disparaging came to repent of it while they were alive; yet, even so, their offenses were so difficult to expiate that they fell into the Avichi hell and remained there for a thousand kalpas. But those who have done me harm have not yet repented of it even in the slightest.

Describing the karmic retribution that such people must receive, the Great Collection Sutra states: "[The Buddha asked], 'If there should be a person who draws blood from the bodies of a thousand, ten thousand, or a million Buddhas, in your thinking, how is it? Will he have committed a grave offense or not?' The great king Brahma replied: 'If a person causes the body of even a single Buddha to bleed, he will have committed an offense so serious that he will fall into the hell of incessant suffering. His offense will be unfathomably grave, and he will have to remain in the great Avichi hell for so many kalpas that their number

cannot be calculated even by means of counting sticks. Graver still is the offense a person would commit by causing the bodies of ten thousand or a million Buddhas to bleed. No one could possibly explain in full either that person's offense or its karmic retribution—no one, that is, except the Thus Come One himself.' The Buddha said, 'Great King Brahma, suppose there should be a person who, for my sake, takes the tonsure and wears a surplice. Even though he has not at any time

received the precepts and therefore observes none, if someone harasses him, abuses him, or strikes him with a staff, then that persecutor's offense will be even graver than that [of injuring ten thousand or a million Buddhas].'"

Nichiren

The sixteenth day of the first month in the second year of Kocho (1262), cyclical sign *mizunoe-inu*

To Kudo Sakon-no-jo



Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter while he was in exile in Ito on the Izu Peninsula. It was addressed to Kudo Sakon-no-jo Yoshitaka, known also as Kudo Yoshitaka, the lord of Amatsu in Awa Province.

Kudo Yoshitaka is said to have converted to Nichiren Daishonin's teachings around 1256, about the same time Shijo Kingo and Ikegami Munenaka did, a few years after the Daishonin first proclaimed his teachings. While the Daishonin was in exile on Izu, Yoshitaka sent offerings to him and continued to maintain pure faith. He was killed defending the Daishonin at the time of the Komatsubara Persecution in the eleventh month of 1264. *The Four Debts of Gratitude* is the only letter still extant that the Daishonin addressed to him.

In this letter, in light of the reason for his banishment, Nichiren Daishonin expresses his conviction that he is a true practitioner of the Lotus Sutra. He mentions the "two important matters" that concern his Izu Exile. He states, "One is that I feel immense joy," and explains the reasons for his joy. The greater part of the letter consists of this explanation. Following this, he states,

"The second of the two important matters is that I feel intense grief." Citing passages from the Lotus and Great Collection sutras that reveal the gravity of the offense of slandering the Law and its devotees, the Daishonin explains that he grieves at the thought of the great karmic retribution his tormentors must undergo. This is the concluding part of the letter.

In the body of the letter, the Daishonin gives two reasons for his "immense joy." One is that he has been able to prove himself to be the votary of the Lotus Sutra by fulfilling the Buddha's prediction made in the sutra that its votary in the Latter Day of the Law will meet with persecution. The other reason is that, by suffering banishment for the sutra's sake, he can repay the four debts of gratitude. He declares that the ruler who condemned him to exile is the very person to whom he is the most grateful; thanks to the ruler, he has been able to fulfill the words of the Lotus Sutra and so prove himself to be its true votary.

Then, the Daishonin stresses the importance of repaying the four debts of gratitude set forth in the Contemplation on the Mind-Ground Sutra.

The four debts of gratitude are the debts owed to all living beings, to one's father and mother, to one's sovereign, and to the three treasures—the Buddha, the Law, and the Buddhist Order.

Among these four debts of gratitude, the Daishonin places special emphasis on the debt owed to the three treasures, without which one could not attain Buddhahood.

Notes

1. Reference is to the Daishonin's exile to Ito on the Izu Peninsula, from the twelfth day of the fifth month, 1261, to the twenty-second day of the second month, 1263.

2. Here "the saha world" indicates the major world system that surrounds our world.

3. The three good paths are those of asuras, human beings, and heavenly beings, in contrast to the three evil paths of hell, hungry spirits, and animals.

4. The story of Ajatashatru is included as one of the nine great persecutions suffered by Shakyamuni.

5. Lotus Sutra, chap. 10.

6. *Ibid.*, chap. 14.

7. The light of the sun, moon, and stars.

8. Wheat, rice, beans, and two types of millet. Also a generic term for all grains.

9. Sweet, pungent, sour, bitter, salty, astringent, and subtle flavors.

10. The six kinds of relatives refer to a father, a mother, an elder brother, a younger brother, a wife, and a son or daughter. Another classification gives a father, a son or daughter, an elder brother, a younger brother, a husband, and a wife.

11. The source of this statement has not been traced; presumably it is based on a passage in the Great Collection Sutra.

12. Lotus Sutra, chap. 10.