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The Recitation of the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” Chapters



IN the letter you sent by messenger, you say that you used to recite one chapter of the Lotus Sutra every day, completing the entire sutra in the space of twenty-eight days, but that now you read the “Medicine King” chapter¹ once a day. You ask if you should simply read each chapter in turn, as you were originally doing.

As for the Lotus Sutra, one may recite the entire sutra of twenty-eight chapters in eight volumes every day; or one may recite only one volume, or one chapter, or one verse, or one phrase, or one word; or one may simply chant the daimoku, Nam-myohorenge-kyo, only once a day, or chant it only once in the course of a lifetime; or hear someone else chant it only once in a lifetime and rejoice in the hearing, or rejoice in hearing the voice of someone else rejoice in the hearing, and so on in this manner to the fiftieth hearer.² And if one were to be at the end, even if one’s faith were weak and one’s sense of rejoicing diluted like the frailty of a child of two or three, or the inability of a cow or horse to distinguish before from after, the blessings one would gain would be a hundred, thousand, ten thousand, million times greater than those gained by persons of keen faculties and superior wisdom who study other sutras, persons such as Shariputra, Maudgalyayana, Manjushri,

and Maitreya, who had committed to memory the entire texts of the various sutras.

We find this mentioned in both the Lotus Sutra and the sixty volumes of commentary³ by T’ien-t’ai and Miaolo. Thus the sutra states [concerning these blessings], “Even the Buddha wisdom could never finish calculating their extent.”⁴ Not even the wisdom of the Buddha can fathom the blessings such a person will obtain. The Buddha wisdom is so marvelous that it knows even the number of raindrops that fall in this major world system during a period, for instance, of seven days or twice seven days. And yet we read that the blessings acquired by one who recites no more than a single word of the Lotus Sutra are the one thing it cannot fathom. How, then, could ordinary people like ourselves, who have committed grave offenses, possibly understand these blessings?

However, it is now some twenty-two hundred years since the Thus Come One’s passing. For many years, the five impurities have flourished, and good deeds in any connection are rare. Though a person may do good, in the course of doing a single good deed he accumulates ten evil ones, so that in the end, for the sake of a small good, he commits great evil. And yet, in his heart, he prides himself on having

practiced great good—such are the times we live in.

Moreover, you were born in the remote land of Japan, a tiny island country in the east separated by two hundred thousand *ri* of mountains and seas from the country of the Thus Come One's birth. And you are a woman, burdened by the five obstacles and bound by the three obediences. How indescribably wonderful, therefore, that in spite of these hindrances you have been able to take faith in the Lotus Sutra!

Even the wise or the learned, such as those who have pored over all the sacred teachings propounded by the Buddha in the course of his lifetime, and who have mastered both the exoteric and esoteric doctrines, are these days abandoning the Lotus Sutra and instead reciting the Nembutsu. What good karma you must have formed in the past, then, to have been born a person able to recite even so much as a verse or a phrase of the Lotus Sutra!

When I read over your letter, I felt as though my eyes were beholding something rarer than the udumbara flower, something even scarcer than the one-eyed turtle encountering a floating log with a hollow in it that fits him exactly.⁵ Moved to heartfelt admiration, I thought that I would like to add just one word or one expression of my own rejoicing, endeavoring in this way to enhance your merit. I fear, however, that, as clouds darken the moon or as dust defiles a mirror, my brief and clumsy attempts at description will only serve to cloak and obscure the incomparably wonderful blessings you will receive, and the thought pains me. Yet, in response to your question, I could scarcely remain silent. Please understand that I am merely joining my one drop to the rivers and the oceans, or adding my torch to the sun and the moon, hoping in this way to increase even slightly the

volume of the water or the brilliance of the light.

First of all, when it comes to the Lotus Sutra, you should understand that, whether one recites all eight volumes, or only one volume, one chapter, one verse, one phrase, or simply the daimoku, or title, the blessings are the same. It is like the water of the great ocean, a single drop of which contains water from all the countless streams and rivers, or like the wish-granting jewel, which, though only a single jewel, can shower all kinds of treasures upon the wisher. And the same is true of a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, or a million such drops of water or such jewels. A single character of the Lotus Sutra is like such a drop of water or such a jewel, and the hundred million characters⁶ are like a hundred million such drops or jewels.

On the other hand, a single character of the other sutras, or the name of any of the various Buddhas, is like one drop of the water of a particular stream or river, or like only one stone from a particular mountain or a particular sea. One such drop does not contain the water of countless other streams and rivers, and one such stone does not possess the virtues that inhere in innumerable other kinds of stones.

Therefore, when it comes to the Lotus Sutra, it is praiseworthy to recite any chapter you have placed your trust in, whichever chapter that may be.

Generally speaking, among all the sacred teachings of the Thus Come One, none has ever been known to contain falsehoods. Yet when we consider the Buddhist teachings more deeply, we find that even among the Thus Come One's golden words there exist various categories such as Mahayana and Hinayana, provisional and true teachings, and exoteric and esoteric doctrines. These distinctions arise from the sutras themselves, and accordingly, we find that they are roughly

outlined in the commentaries of the various scholars and teachers.

To state the essence of the matter, among the doctrines propounded by Shakyamuni Buddha in the fifty or more years of his teaching life, those put forward in the first forty or more years are of a questionable nature. We can say so because the Buddha himself clearly stated in the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra, “In these more than forty years, I have not yet revealed the truth.” And in the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha himself proclaims concerning its every word and phrase, “Honestly discarding expedient means, I will preach only the unsurpassed way.”⁷

Moreover, Many Treasures Buddha sprang up from the earth to add his testimony, declaring, “The Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law . . . all that you [Shakyamuni Buddha] have expounded is the truth!”⁸ And the Buddhas of the ten directions all gathered at the assembly where the Lotus Sutra was being preached and extended their tongues to give further support to the assertion that not a single word of the Lotus Sutra is false. It was as though a great king, his consort, and his most venerable subjects had all with one accord given their word.

Suppose that a man or a woman who has recited even a single word of the Lotus Sutra were to be dragged down by the unfathomably heavy karma of the ten evil acts, the five cardinal sins, or the four major offenses, and fall into the evil paths. Even if the sun and moon should never again emerge from the east, even if the great earth itself should turn over, even if the tides of the great ocean should cease to ebb and flow, even if broken stones are made whole, and even if the waters of the streams and rivers cease to flow into the ocean, no woman who believes in the Lotus Sutra could ever be dragged down by worldly faults and fall into the evil paths.

If a woman who believes in the Lotus Sutra should ever fall into the evil paths as a result of jealousy or ill temper or because of excessive greed, then the Thus Come One Shakyamuni, the Buddha Many Treasures, and the Buddhas of the ten directions would immediately be guilty of breaking the vow they have upheld over the span of countless kalpas never to tell a lie. Their offense would be even greater than the wild falsehoods and deceptions of Devadatta or the outrageous lies told by Kokalika. But how could such a thing ever happen? Thus a person who embraces the Lotus Sutra is absolutely assured of its blessings.

On the other hand, even if one does not commit a single evil deed throughout one’s entire lifetime, and observes the five precepts, the eight precepts, the ten precepts, the ten good precepts, the two hundred and fifty precepts, the five hundred precepts, or countless numbers of precepts; even if one learns all the other sutras by heart, makes offerings to all the other Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and accumulates immeasurable merit, if one but fails to put one’s faith in the Lotus Sutra; or if one has faith in it, but considers that it ranks on the same level as the other sutras and the teachings of the other Buddhas; or if one recognizes its superiority, but constantly engages in other religious disciplines, practicing the Lotus Sutra only from time to time; or if one associates on friendly terms with priests of the Nembutsu, who do not believe in the Lotus Sutra but slander it; or if one thinks that those who insist the Lotus Sutra does not suit the people’s capacity in the latter age are guilty of no fault, then all the merit of the countless good acts one has performed throughout one’s life will suddenly vanish. Moreover, the blessings resulting from one’s practice of the Lotus Sutra will for some time be obscured, and one will fall into the great citadel of the Avichi hell as sure-

ly as rain falls from the sky or rocks tumble down from the peaks into the valleys.

Even if one has committed the ten evil acts or the five cardinal sins, so long as one does not turn one's back on the Lotus Sutra, one will without doubt be reborn in the pure land and attain Buddhahood. On the other hand, we read in the sutra that, even if one observes the precepts, embraces all the other sutras, and believes in the various Buddhas and bodhisattvas, if one fails to take faith in the Lotus Sutra, one is certain to fall into the evil paths.

Limited though my ability may be, when I observe the situation in the world these days, it seems to me that the great majority of both lay believers and members of the clergy are guilty of slandering the correct teaching.

But to return to your question. As I said before, though no chapter of the Lotus Sutra is negligible, among the entire twenty-eight chapters, the “Expedient Means” chapter and the “Life Span” chapter are particularly outstanding. The remaining chapters are all in a sense the branches and leaves of these two chapters. Therefore, for your regular recitation, I recommend that you practice reading the prose sections of the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” chapters. In addition, it might be well if you wrote out separate copies of these sections. The remaining twenty-six chapters are like the shadow that follows one's body or the value inherent in a jewel. If you recite the “Life Span” and “Expedient Means” chapters, then the remaining chapters will naturally be included even though you do not recite them. It is true that the “Medicine King” and “Devadatta” chapters⁹ deal specifically with women's attainment of Buddhahood or rebirth in the pure land. But the “Devadatta” chapter is a branch and leaf of the “Expedient Means” chapter, and the “Medicine King” chapter is a branch and leaf of the “Expedi-

ent Means” and the “Life Span” chapters.¹⁰ Therefore, you should regularly recite these two chapters, the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” chapters. As for the remaining chapters, you may turn to them from time to time when you have a moment of leisure.

Also in your letter, you say that three times each day you bow in reverence to the seven characters of the daimoku,¹¹ and that each day you repeat the words *Namu-ichijo-myoten*¹² ten thousand times. At times of menstruation, however, you refrain from reading the sutra. You ask if it is unseemly to bow in reverence to the seven characters or to recite *Namu-ichijo-myoten* without facing [the Gohonzon], or if you should refrain from doing even that during your menstrual period. You also ask how many days following the end of your period you should wait before resuming recitation of the sutra.

This is a matter that concerns all women and about which they always inquire. In past times, too, we find many persons addressing themselves to this question concerning women. But because the sacred teachings put forward by the Buddha in the course of his lifetime do not touch upon this point, no one has been able to offer any clear scriptural proof upon which to base an answer. In my own study of the sacred teachings, though I find clear prohibitions on certain days of the month against the impurity of things like meat or wine, the five spicy foods, or sexual acts, for instance, I have never come across any passage in the sutras or treatises that speaks of avoidances connected with menstruation.

While the Buddha was in the world, many women in their prime became nuns and devoted themselves to the Buddha's teachings, but they were never shunned on account of their menstrual period. Judging from this, I would say that menstruation does not represent

any kind of impurity coming from an external source. It is simply a characteristic of the female sex, a phenomenon related to the perpetuation of the seed of birth and death. Or in another sense, it might be regarded as a kind of chronically recurring illness. In the case of feces and urine, though these are substances produced by the body, so long as one observes cleanly habits, there are no special prohibitions to be observed concerning them. Surely the same must be true of menstruation. That is why, I think, we hear of no particular rules for avoidance pertaining to the subject in India or China.

Japan, however, is a land of the gods. And it is the way of this country that, although the Buddhas and bodhisattvas have manifested themselves here in the form of gods,¹³ strangely enough, in many cases they do not conform to the sutras and treatises. Nevertheless, if one goes against them, one will incur actual punishment.

When we scrutinize the sutras and treatises with care, we find that there is a teaching about a precept known as following the customs of the region¹⁴ that corresponds to this. The meaning of this precept is that, so long as no seriously offensive act is involved, then even if one were to depart to some slight degree from the teachings of Buddhism, it would be better to avoid going against the manners and customs of the country. This is a precept expounded by the Buddha. It appears that some wise men who are unaware of this point express extreme views, saying such things as, because the gods are demon-like beings they are unworthy of reverence, and that this has offended many lay supporters.

If so, since the gods of Japan have in most cases desired that prohibitions be observed during the period of menstruation, perhaps people born in this country should seriously observe such prohibitions.

However, I do not think that such prohibitions should interfere with a woman's daily religious devotions. I would guess that it is persons who never had any faith in the Lotus Sutra to begin with who tell you otherwise. They are trying to think of some way to make you stop reciting the sutra, but they do not feel that they can come right out and advise you to cast the sutra aside. So they use the pretext of bodily impurity to try to distance you from it. They intimidate you by telling you that, if you continue your regular devotions during a period of impurity, you will be treating the sutra with disrespect. In this way they mean to trick you into incurring an offense.

I hope you will keep in mind all that I have said regarding this matter. On this basis, even if your menstrual period should last as long as seven days, if you feel so inclined, dispense with the reading of the sutra and simply recite Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Also, when making your devotions, you need not bow facing the sutra.

On the other hand, if suddenly you should feel, for example, the approach of death, then even if you are eating fish or fowl,¹⁵ if you are able to read the sutra, you should do so, and likewise chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Needless to say, the same principle applies during your period of menstruation.

Though reciting the words *Namu-ichijo-myoten* amounts to the same thing, it would be better if you just chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, as Bodhisattva Vasubandhu and the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai did.¹⁶ There are specific reasons why I say this.

Respectfully,
Nichiren

The seventeenth day of the fourth month in the first year of Bun'ei (1264), cyclical sign *kinoe-ne*

To the wife of Daigaku Saburo

Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter in 1264, while living in Kamakura, to the wife of Hiki Daigaku Saburo Yoshimoto. Yoshimoto had studied Confucianism in Kyoto where he had served under the Retired Emperor Juntoku. He later went to Kamakura where he was employed by the military government as a Confucian scholar. He is said to have become the Daishonin's follower around 1260. Tradition has it that he resolved to embrace the Daishonin's teaching upon reading a draft of *On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land*. Both Yoshimoto and his wife were strong believers.

The present letter was written in response to inquiries by Yoshimoto's wife about the formalities to be observed in her daily practice of Buddhism and about the recitation of the sutra and the daimoku during her menstrual period. Thus this letter is also referred to by the title *Letter on Menstruation*.

Judging from this letter, it appears that the Daishonin had early on established the formula of reciting the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” chapters of the Lotus Sutra as the daily practice supporting the chanting of the daimoku. Yoshimoto's wife had at first been following the practice prevalent in her day, that is, continuously reading through the entire sutra, a chapter a day. She had then begun to read only the “Medicine King” chapter. The Daishonin praises her efforts and suggests reading the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” chapters and reciting *Nam-myoho-enge-kyo* instead of *Namu-ichijo-myoten*.

Both the question in connection with menstruation and the Daishonin's explanation are best understood in the historical context of Kamakura-era Japan. Shinto (literally, the way of the gods), the indigenous Japanese religion, strongly emphasized the observance

of ritual purity and had established numerous avoidances, or taboos, to this end. Death, illness, wounds, childbirth, menstruation, and so forth were all regarded as sources of impurity, and a person who experienced any of these, directly or indirectly, was required to undergo ritual purification before engaging in any form of worship. Women were accordingly prohibited from taking part in religious ceremonies during their menstrual period. These taboos were deeply rooted in the popular consciousness and were observed long after the introduction of Buddhism, ultimately becoming mixed with Buddhist practices to the point that few people were aware of their non-Buddhist origin. For example, it was partly out of concern for avoiding such “impurity” that women were often prohibited from entering the grounds of Buddhist monasteries.

In response to the question from Yoshimoto's wife, the Daishonin first states that no sutra mentions taboos concerning menstruation. Furthermore, he explains, from a Buddhist perspective no reason exists to consider the menses impure; it is simply a natural function of the body.

However, the Daishonin continues, the custom of observing such prohibitions and taboos has been firmly established in Japanese society, and one should not categorically reject social customs and observances simply because they are unrelated to Buddhism. In this connection, he refers to the Buddhist principle of respecting the customs of the region. According to this principle, even if one must depart in terms of minor details from the Buddhist teaching, one should avoid needlessly violating the rules of society. Such flexibility is characteristic of Buddhism, which concerns itself with enabling people to awaken to the fundamental truth of

all things, not with governing the details of their lives. Thus, as it has spread, Buddhism has adapted its peripheral aspects to the time and the place, embracing local customs while maintaining its essential message intact.

Nevertheless, though minor details in the practice of Buddhism may be adapted to fit the society, basic princi-

ples should not be compromised. The Daishonin therefore advises Yoshimoto's wife that honoring the social conventions—in this case, the observance of prohibitions concerning menstruation—does not mean that she should blindly obey them to the extent that they interfere with her daily Buddhist practice.

Notes

1. The “Medicine King” chapter is the twenty-third chapter of the Lotus Sutra. It contains a passage stating that after her death a woman who practices the Lotus Sutra will go directly to the pure land; thus, it was particularly appealing to women.

2. The Daishonin refers here to the principle of continual propagation to the fiftieth person, described in the “Responding with Joy” chapter of the Lotus Sutra. Suppose, the sutra says, a person was to hear the Lotus Sutra and rejoice, then preach it to a second person, who also rejoices and in turn preaches it to a third, and so on, until the fiftieth person hears the sutra. The benefit received by that person on hearing the sutra and rejoicing, even at fifty removes, would be immeasurable.

3. Sixty volumes of commentary: T'ien-t'ai's three major works—*The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*, *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*, and *Great Concentration and Insight*—each consisting of ten volumes, and Miao-lo's three commentaries on those works, each also consisting of ten volumes.

4. Lotus Sutra, chap. 23.

5. These are both Buddhist metaphors for something of very rare occurrence; they are mentioned frequently by the Daishonin. The udumbara is a legendary plant said to bloom once every three thousand years to herald the advent of a wheel-turning king or a Buddha. The one-eyed turtle is mentioned in the “King Wonderful Adornment” chapter of the Lotus Sutra. For the one-eyed turtle, see also Glossary.

6. This is a figurative expression; the Lotus Sutra actually consists of 69,384 characters.

7. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.

8. Ibid., chap. 11.

9. The “Devadatta” chapter tells the

story of the dragon king's daughter, who attained supreme enlightenment in a single moment through the power of the Lotus Sutra. She was considered to represent women's potential for Buddhahood.

10. This statement derives from the Buddhist tradition of analyzing sutras or portions thereof so that they fall into “three divisions” (preparation, revelation, and transmission). In the theoretical teaching, or the first fourteen chapters of the Lotus Sutra, the “Expedient Means” chapter is characterized as revelation and the “Devadatta” chapter as transmission; hence the Daishonin says that the “Devadatta” chapter is a “branch and leaf” of the “Expedient Means” chapter. When the entire sutra is considered in terms of the three divisions, both the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” chapters are characterized as revelation, and the “Medicine King” chapter as transmission; hence the “Medicine King” chapter is a “branch and leaf” of both the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” chapters.

11. That is, the Gohonzon.

12. *Namu-ichijo-myoten* means “devotion to the wonderful sutra of the one vehicle.” It was an expression of devotion to the Lotus Sutra that was chanted as an invocation.

13. The Daishonin is referring to the widespread belief that the indigenous Japanese deities were local manifestations or incarnations of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. This concept, which took firm hold around the tenth century, reflected a tendency toward the synthesis of Buddhist and Shinto elements.

14. The precept of adapting to local customs. It is mentioned in passages in *The Fivefold Rules of Discipline* and in the preface to *The Essentials of “The Fourfold Rules of Discipline.”* The precept states that, in matters

that the Buddha himself did not expressly either permit or forbid, one may act in accordance with local custom, provided that the fundamental principles of Buddhism are not violated.

15. Eating the flesh of either fish or fowl was also considered a source of impurity.

16. *The Treatise on the Lotus Sutra*, attributed to Vasubandhu, contains a salutation

in praise of the three treasures of the Lotus Sutra that the Daishonin may have interpreted as an expression of devotion to the Mystic Law. *The Method of Repentance through the Lotus Meditation*, a Chinese text usually attributed either to T'ien-t'ai or to his teacher Nan-yüeh, also contains in several places the phrase “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.”