

The Daimoku of the Lotus Sutra

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NAM-MYOHO-RENGE-KYO.
Question: Is it possible, without understanding the meaning of the Lotus Sutra, but merely by chanting the five or seven characters of Nam-myoho-enge-kyo once a day, once a month, or simply once a year, once a decade, or once in a lifetime, to avoid being drawn into trivial or serious acts of evil, to escape falling into the four evil paths, and instead to eventually reach the stage of non-regression?

Answer: Yes, it is.

Question: You may talk about fire, but unless you put your hand in a flame, you will never burn yourself. You may say “water, water!” but unless you actually drink it, you will never satisfy your thirst. Then how, just by chanting the daimoku of Nam-myoho-enge-kyo without understanding what it means, can you escape from the evil paths of existence?

Answer: They say that, if you play a koto strung with a lion’s sinews, then all the other kinds of strings will snap. And if you so much as hear the words “pickled plum,” your mouth will begin to water. Even in everyday life there are such wonders, so how much greater are the wonders of the Lotus Sutra!

We are told that parrots, simply by twittering the four noble truths of the

Hinayana teachings, were able to be reborn in heaven,¹ and that men, simply by respecting the three treasures, were able to escape being swallowed by a huge fish.² How much more effective, then, is the daimoku of the Lotus Sutra, which is the very heart of all the eighty thousand sacred teachings of Buddhism and the eye of all the Buddhas! How can you doubt that by chanting it you can escape from the four evil paths?

The Lotus Sutra, wherein the Buddha honestly discarded expedient means, says that one can “gain entrance through faith alone.”³ And the Nirvana Sutra, which the Buddha preached in the grove of sal trees on the last day of his life, states, “Although there are innumerable practices that lead to enlightenment, if one teaches faith, then that includes all those practices.”

Thus faith is the basic requirement for entering the way of the Buddha. In the fifty-two stages of bodhisattva practice, the first ten stages, dealing with faith, are basic, and the first of these ten stages is that of arousing pure faith. Though lacking in knowledge of Buddhism, a person of faith, even if dull-witted, is to be reckoned as a person of correct views. But even though one has some knowledge of Buddhism, if one is without faith, then one is to be

considered a slanderer and an icchantika, or person of incorrigible disbelief.

The monk Sunakshatra observed the two hundred and fifty precepts, mastered the four stages of meditation, and was versed in all the twelve divisions of the scriptures, while Devadatta memorized the sixty thousand non-Buddhist teachings and the eighty thousand Buddhist teachings, and could manifest eighteen miraculous powers⁴ with his body. And yet it is said that these men, because they had knowledge but no faith, are now in the great citadel of the Avichi hell. Mahakashyapa and Shariputra on the other hand lacked knowledge but had faith, and the Buddha accordingly predicted that they would become the Thus Come Ones Light Bright and Flower Glow, respectively. The Buddha stated, "If one should harbor doubt and fail to believe, one will fall at once into the evil paths."⁵ These words refer to those who have knowledge but are without faith.

And yet contemporary scholars ask, "How is it possible, simply by chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo with faith but no understanding, to avoid the evil paths?" If we accept the words of the sutra, these scholars themselves can hardly avoid falling into the great citadel of the Avichi hell.

Thus, as we have seen, even those who lack understanding, so long as they chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, can avoid the evil paths. This is like lotus flowers, which turn as the sun does, though the lotus has no mind to direct it, or like the plantain that grows with the rumbling of thunder, though this plant has no ears to hear it.⁶ Now we are like the lotus or the plantain, and the daimoku of the Lotus Sutra is like the sun or the thunder.

People say that, if you tie a piece of living rhinoceros horn to your body and enter the water, the water will not come within five feet of you.⁷ They

also say that, if one leaf of the sandalwood tree unfurls, it can eradicate the foul odor of the eranda trees for a distance of forty yojanas. In this case, our evil karma may be likened to the eranda trees or the water, and the daimoku of the Lotus Sutra may be likened to the rhinoceros horn or the sandalwood leaf.

Diamonds are so hard that almost no substance will cut them, and yet they can be cut by a sheep's horn or a turtle's shell. The limbs of the nyagrodha⁸ tree are so stout that the largest birds can perch on them without breaking them, and yet they are vulnerable to the tailorbird,⁹ which is so tiny it could almost build its nest on the eyelashes of a mosquito. Here, our evil karma is analogous to the diamond or the nyagrodha tree, and the daimoku of the Lotus Sutra, to the sheep's horn or the tailorbird. Amber draws dust, and a magnet attracts iron particles; here our evil karma is like the dust or iron, and the daimoku of the Lotus Sutra is like the amber or the magnet. If we consider these [analogies, we can see why] we should always chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo.

The first volume of the Lotus Sutra states, "Throughout incalculable, innumerable kalpas it is rare that one may hear this Law."¹⁰ And the fifth volume says, "As for this Lotus Sutra, throughout immeasurable numbers of lands one cannot even hear its name."¹¹ Thus it is an extremely rare thing to hear the name of the Lotus Sutra. Though the Buddhas Sushanta¹² and Many Treasures made their appearance in the world, they did not utter so much as the name of the Lotus Sutra. And though the Thus Come One Shakyamuni made his advent expressly for the purpose of preaching the Lotus Sutra, he kept the name of that sutra a secret and never referred to it for a period of forty-two years. It was only when he reached the age of seventy-two that he

first began to intone Myoho-*renge-kyo*, the daimoku of the sutra. However, the people of faraway countries such as China and Japan were unable to hear of it at that time. It was over a thousand years before China heard so much as the name of the sutra, and another three hundred and fifty or more years before it was heard in Japan.

Thus, encountering this sutra is as rare as the blossoming of the udumbara flower, which occurs but once in three thousand years, or the one-eyed turtle finding a floating piece of sandalwood, which happens only once in innumerable, boundless kalpas.

Suppose one were to place a needle in the earth point up and throw down tiny mustard seeds at it from the palace of the great king Brahma in the heavens. One could sooner impale a mustard seed on the point of a needle in this way than encounter the daimoku of the Lotus Sutra. Or suppose one were to place a needle upright on top of the Mount Sumeru in one world and then, standing atop the Mount Sumeru of another world on a very windy day, were to try to cast a thread so that it reached the other mountain and passed through the eye of the needle. One could sooner thread a needle in this way than encounter the daimoku of the Lotus Sutra.

Therefore, when you chant the daimoku of this sutra, you should be aware that it is a more joyful thing than for one who was born blind to gain sight and see one's father and mother, and a rarer thing than for a man who has been seized by a powerful enemy to be released and reunited with his wife and children.

Question: What passages of proof can be cited to show that one should chant only the daimoku?

Answer: The eighth volume of the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law states that one who accepts and upholds the mere name of the Lotus Sutra

will enjoy immeasurable good fortune. The Lotus Sutra of the Correct Law says that, if one hears this sutra and proclaims and embraces its title, one will enjoy merit beyond measure. And the Supplemented Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law says that one who accepts and upholds the name of the Lotus Sutra will enjoy immeasurable good fortune. These statements indicate that the good fortune one receives from simply chanting the daimoku is beyond measure.

To accept, uphold, read, recite, take delight in, and protect all the eight volumes and twenty-eight chapters of the Lotus Sutra is called the comprehensive practice. To accept, uphold, and protect the "Expedient Means" chapter and the "Life Span" chapter is called the abbreviated practice. And simply to chant one four-phrase verse or the daimoku, and to protect those who do so, is called the essential practice. Hence, among these three kinds of practice, comprehensive, abbreviated, and essential, the daimoku is defined as the essential practice.

Question: How great are the blessings contained within the five characters of Myoho-*renge-kyo*?

Answer: The great ocean contains all the numerous rivers that flow into it, the great earth contains all sentient and insentient beings, the wish-granting jewel is capable of showering down innumerable treasures, and the heavenly king Brahma rules over all the three-fold world. The five characters of Myoho-*renge-kyo* are comparable to these. All beings of the nine worlds, as well as those in the world of Buddhahood, are contained within them. And since all beings of the Ten Worlds are contained within them, so are their environments.

Let us first examine the fact that the five characters, Myoho-*renge-kyo*, contain within them all teachings. The single character *kyo*, or "sutra," is the king

of all sutras, and all the other sutras are encompassed by it. The Buddha appeared in the world and over a period of fifty years preached eighty thousand sacred teachings. At that time the life span of human beings is said to have been one hundred years. The Buddha passed away in the middle of the night on the fifteenth day of the second month of the year with the cyclical sign *mizunoe-saru*.¹³ Thereafter, during some ninety days of summer, or the period from the eighth day of the fourth month until the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the same year, one thousand arhats gathered at the compilation hall and set down all the sutras.

After that, during the one thousand years of the Former Day of the Law, all these various sutras spread throughout the five regions of India, but they did not reach as far as China. It was only in the fifteenth year of the Middle Day of the Law [1,015 years after the Buddha's passing] that Buddhist sutras were first introduced to China. This was in the year with the cyclical sign *hinoto-u*, the tenth year of the Yung-p'ing era (C.E. 67) in the reign of Emperor Ming of the Later Han dynasty. From that time until the year with the cyclical sign *kanoe-uma*, the eighteenth year of the K'ai-yüan era (C.E. 730) in the reign of Emperor Hsüan-tsung of the T'ang dynasty, a total of 176 translators went over to China, taking with them 1,076 sutras, works on discipline, and treatises comprising 5,048 volumes contained in 480 scroll cases. All of these sacred writings are followers of the single character *kyo* of the Lotus Sutra.

Among the sutras that the Buddha preached during the more than forty years before he expounded the Lotus Sutra, there is one called the Great and Vast Buddha Flower Garland Sutra. This sutra is preserved in the dragon king's palace in three versions. The first version contains as many chapters as the dust particles of ten major world

systems. The second version contains 498,800 verses, and the third version contains 100,000 verses in forty-eight chapters. Outside of these three versions, only the smaller texts such as the eighty-volume and sixty-volume versions¹⁴ are preserved in China and Japan.

In addition, there are the Hinayana Agama sutras, and the various Mahayana sutras of the Correct and Equal and the Wisdom periods. Among the latter, the Sanskrit text of the Mahavairochana Sutra devotes a total of thirty-five hundred verses simply to the explanation of the five characters of the mantra *avarahakha*,¹⁵ to say nothing of the countless verses it uses to describe the seeds, august forms, and samayas¹⁶ of the various honored ones. In China, however, the text exists in a mere six- or seven-volume form. The Nirvana Sutra, which the Buddha preached in the sal grove on his last day, is preserved in China in a version that is only forty volumes long, though in this case, too, the Sanskrit versions of the text have many more volumes. All these various sutras are followers of the Lotus Sutra, the most profound teaching of the Thus Come One Shakyamuni. In addition, all the sutras expounded by the seven Buddhas of the past,¹⁷ the thousand Buddhas, or the Buddhas of countless kalpas ago, as well as those expounded by the Buddhas presently living in the ten directions, are followers of the single character *kyo* of the Lotus Sutra.

Thus, in the "Medicine King" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha addresses Bodhisattva Constellation King Flower, saying that, just as the ocean is foremost among all the rivers, streams, and other bodies of water, just as Mount Sumeru is foremost among all the mountains, and just as the moon is foremost among the heavenly bodies, [so the Lotus Sutra is likewise among all the sutras]. The Great Teacher

Miao-lo says in his commentary that the Lotus Sutra is "foremost among all the sutras preached in the past, now being preached, or to be preached in the future."¹⁸

Within this single character *kyo* are contained all the sutras in the worlds throughout the ten directions. It is like the wish-granting jewel that contains within it all manner of treasures, or the vastness of space that encompasses all phenomena. And because this single character *kyo* of Myoho-enge-kyo is the supreme achievement of the Buddha's lifetime of teaching, the other four characters, Myo-ho-ren-ge, likewise surpass all the other eighty thousand doctrines that the Buddha taught.

Coming now to the character *myo*, the Lotus Sutra says, "This sutra opens the gate of expedient means and shows the form of true reality."¹⁹ The Great Teacher Chang-an states, "*Myo* means to reveal the depths of the secret storehouse."²⁰ The Great Teacher Miao-lo says of this, "To reveal means to open."²¹ Hence the character *myo* means to open.

If there is a storehouse full of treasures but no key, then it cannot be opened, and if it cannot be opened, then the treasures inside cannot be seen. The Buddha preached the Flower Garland Sutra, but he did not therein expound the key to open this sutra. Likewise, in the more than forty years that followed, he preached the sutras of the Agama, Correct and Equal, and Wisdom periods as well as the Meditation Sutra, but he did not reveal their meaning. Their doors remained closed, and therefore no one could understand these sutras. Even though people thought they understood, their understanding was in fact distorted.

But then the Buddha preached the Lotus Sutra and in this way opened the storehouses of the sutras. And for the first time in more than forty years, all the people of the nine worlds were able

to view the treasures that lay within. To give an analogy, even though there are people and animals, plants and trees on the earth, without the light of the sun or moon, even those with good eyes cannot make out their shapes and colors. It is when the sun or moon rises that one can discern for the first time what these things really look like. The sutras that preceded the Lotus Sutra were shrouded in the darkness of a long night, and the essential and theoretical teachings of the Lotus Sutra were like the sun and moon.

Among the bodhisattvas with their two good eyes, the cross-eyed people of the two vehicles, ordinary people with their blind eyes, or icchantikas who have been blind since birth, there were none who could make out the true color or shape of things by means of the earlier sutras. But when the Lotus Sutra was preached and the moon of the theoretical teaching came forth, first the bodhisattvas with their two good eyes gained enlightenment, and then the cross-eyed people of the two vehicles. Next the blind eyes of ordinary people were opened, and then even icchantikas, who had been blind from birth, were able to establish a relationship with the Lotus Sutra that assured them that their eyes would one day open. All this was due entirely to the virtue of the single character *myo*.

There are two *myo*, or mystic, principles expounded in the Lotus Sutra, one in the first fourteen chapters, which constitute the theoretical teaching, and one in the latter fourteen chapters, which constitute the essential teaching.²² From another point of view, there are twenty mystic principles,²³ ten in the theoretical teaching and ten in the essential teaching; or there are sixty mystic principles,²⁴ thirty in the theoretical teaching and thirty in the essential teaching. From yet other points of view, forty mystic principles²⁵ may be discerned in each half of the

Lotus Sutra. By adding these to the forty mystic principles concerning the observation of the mind,²⁶ the single character *myo* will be found to contain fully one hundred and twenty *myo*, or mystic, principles.

One fundamental *myo*, or mystic, principle underlies every one of the 69,384 characters that make up the Lotus Sutra. Hence the Lotus Sutra comprises a total of 69,384 mystic principles.

Myo in India is rendered as *sad*, and in China, as *miao*. *Myo* means to be fully endowed, which in turn has the meaning of "perfect and full." Each word and each character of the Lotus Sutra contains within it all the 69,384 characters that compose the sutra. To illustrate, one drop of the great ocean contains within it the waters of all the various rivers that flow into the ocean, and a single wish-granting jewel, though no bigger than a mustard seed, is capable of showering down the treasures that one could wish for with all the wish-granting jewels.

To give another analogy, plants and trees are withered and bare in autumn and winter, but when the sun of spring and summer shines on them, they put forth branches and leaves, and then flowers and fruit. Before the preaching of the Lotus Sutra, the people in the nine worlds were like plants and trees in autumn and winter. But when the single character *myo* of the Lotus Sutra shone on them like the spring and summer sun, then the flower of the aspiration for enlightenment blossomed, and the fruit of Buddhahood or rebirth in the pure land emerged.

Bodhisattva Nagarjuna in his *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* says, "[The Lotus Sutra is] like a great physician who can change poison into medicine." This quotation occurs in a passage in *Great Perfection of Wisdom* that explains the virtues inherent in the character *myo* of the Lotus Sutra.

The Great Teacher Miao-lo remarks, "Because it can cure what is thought to be incurable, it is called *myo*, or wonderful."²⁷

In general, there are four kinds of people who have great difficulty in attaining Buddhahood or rebirth in the pure land. First are those predestined for the two vehicles,²⁸ second are icchantikas, third are those who cling to the doctrine of void,²⁹ and fourth are those who slander the Law. But through the Lotus Sutra, all of these people are able to become Buddhas. That is why the Lotus Sutra is called *myo*.

Devadatta was the eldest son of King Dronodana and a nephew of King Shuddhodana [the father of the Buddha Shakyamuni], which made him the Buddha's cousin. He was also the elder brother of the Buddha's disciple, the Venerable Ananda. He was thus by no means a person of low station in the southern continent, Jambudvīpa. He became a disciple of the monk Sudaya³⁰ and entered the religious life. From the Venerable Ananda he learned the eighteen miraculous powers, and he committed to memory the sixty thousand teachings of the non-Buddhist schools and the eighty thousand teachings of Buddhism. He observed the five ascetic practices³¹ and appeared almost more saintly than the Buddha himself. Thinking to make himself a leader like the Buddha, he dared to commit the crime of disrupting the Buddhist Order by establishing his own ordination platform on Mount Gayashirsha³² and inviting the Buddha's disciples over to his side. He confided to Crown Prince Ajatashatru: "I intend to kill the Buddha and become the new Buddha. You must kill your father, the king [Bimbisara], and become the new king in his place!"

After Crown Prince Ajatashatru had in fact killed his father, Devadatta kept watch on the Buddha's activities and with a large stone caused his blood to flow. He also struck and killed the nun

Utpalavarna who had reached the state of arhat. Thus he committed fully three of the five cardinal sins.

In addition, with the Venerable Kokalika as his disciple and King Ajata-shatru as his patron, Devadatta began to attract followers from everywhere, until throughout the five regions of India with its sixteen great states, five hundred middle-sized states, and ten thousand small states, every soul guilty of one, two, or three of the cardinal sins was a member of his group. They gathered about him as the various rivers gather in the great ocean, or as plants and trees gather on a great mountain. As the wise gathered about Shariputra, and those with transcendental powers flocked to Maudgalyayana, so did evil persons throw in their lot with Devadatta.

As a result, the great earth, which is 168,000 yojanas thick and rests on a windy circle³³ as hard as a diamond, nevertheless split open, plunging Devadatta alive into the great citadel of the hell of incessant suffering. His leading disciple Kokalika also fell into hell alive, as did the Brahman's daughter Chinchā, King Virudhaka, and the monk Sunakshatra. Moreover, the people of India with its five regions and sixteen great states, five hundred middle-sized states, and ten thousand small states all observed this. Those in the six heavens of the world of desire and in the four meditation heavens, all beings in both the worlds of form and formlessness,³⁴ including Brahma, Shakra, the devil king of the sixth heaven, and King Yama, likewise witnessed their fate.

All the beings throughout the major world system and the worlds of the ten directions heard about this, and unanimously concluded that, even though as many kalpas should pass as there are dust particles of the land, Devadatta and the others would never escape from the great citadel of the hell of incessant suffering, and that, though the stone that

marks the duration of a kalpa might be worn completely away, they would continue to suffer in the Avichi hell. How astounding, then, that in the "Devadatta" chapter of the Lotus Sutra Shakyamuni Buddha should reveal that Devadatta was his teacher in a past existence and should predict that he would attain enlightenment in the future as a Thus Come One called Heavenly King! If the sutras preached before the Lotus Sutra are true, then the Lotus Sutra must be an outrageous lie. But if the Lotus Sutra is true, then the previous sutras must be guilty of perpetrating the wildest deceptions.

If Devadatta, who committed three of the five cardinal sins and in addition was guilty of countless other grave offenses, could become the Thus Come One Heavenly King, then there can be no doubt that the other evildoers who committed only one or two of the cardinal sins will surely attain the way as well. For if the great earth itself could be overturned, then the plants and trees on it would as a matter of course be overturned. And if one can crush the hardest stone, one can certainly bend the pliant grasses. Therefore, the Lotus Sutra is called *myō*.

Coming now to the subject of women, we find that they are strongly condemned in both the Buddhist and non-Buddhist writings. The works known as the *Three Records* and the *Five Canons* of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors of ancient China depict them as fawning and crooked. For this reason, disaster is said to have come about because of the three women of antiquity.³⁵ Thus women are identified as the cause of the downfall of a nation and its people.

The Flower Garland Sutra, the first great teaching that the Buddha preached following his enlightenment, states, "Women are messengers of hell who can destroy the seeds of Buddhahood. They may look like bodhisattvas, but at

heart they are like yaksha demons.”³⁶ The Nirvana Sutra, the Buddha’s last teaching that he delivered in the grove of sal trees, says, “All rivers and streams are invariably winding and devious, and all women are invariably fawning and crooked.” It also says, “If all the desires and delusions of all the men throughout the major world system were lumped together, they would be no greater than the karmic impediment of one single woman.”

When the Flower Garland Sutra says that women “can destroy the seeds of Buddhahood,” it means that they scorch and burn the seeds that would otherwise allow them to become Buddhas. When clouds mass in the sky in a time of great drought and heavy rain falls to earth, then countless withered plants and trees everywhere will put forth blossoms and bear fruit. But this is not true of seeds that have been scorched. They will never sprout; rather the heavy rain makes them rot.

Now the Buddha is like the masses of clouds, his teachings are like the heavy rain, and the withered plants and trees are like all living beings. When they are watered by the rain of the Buddhist teachings and observe the five precepts, the ten good precepts, and the meditational practices, all of which bring merit, they will put forth blossoms and bear fruit. The scorched seeds that never sprout even though the rain falls on them, but instead rot, are comparable to women, who, though they encounter the Buddhist teachings, cannot free themselves from the sufferings of birth and death, but instead turn away from the truth of Buddhism and fall into the evil paths. This is what the sutra means when it says that women “can destroy the seeds of Buddhahood.”

The passage in the Nirvana Sutra cited above says that, just as all rivers and streams twist and wind, so too are women perverse and devious. Because

water is a pliant substance, when its path is blocked by some hard object such as a rock or a mountain, it will split into two streams or turn aside, flowing now this way, now that. Women are the same; their minds are soft and weak. Though they may believe that a certain course is right, if they come up against the strong will of a man and find their way blocked, then they will turn in some direction quite different from the one they originally intended.

Again, though you may trace pictures on the surface of the water, nothing of what you have drawn will remain. Women are the same, for lack of steadfastness is their basic character. Hence they will think a certain way at one moment, and then a moment later have quite a different view. But the basic character of a Buddha is honesty and straightforwardness. Hence women, with their devious ways, can never become Buddhas.

Women are doomed to the five obstacles and the three types of obedience. Hence the Silver-Colored Woman Sutra says that, even if the eyes of the Buddhas of the three existences were to fall to the ground, no woman could ever attain Buddhahood. *Great Perfection of Wisdom* says that one could sooner catch the wind than grasp the mind of a woman.

Yet though all female beings were so despised in the various sutras, when Bodhisattva Manjushri spoke the single character *myo*, a woman was instantly able to become a Buddha. So extraordinary was this occurrence that Bodhisattva Wisdom Accumulated, the foremost disciple of the Buddha Many Treasures in the World of Treasure Purity, and the Venerable Shariputra, who was known among the Thus Come One Shakyamuni’s disciples as the foremost in wisdom, protested. They said that, according to all the Mahayana and Hinayana sutras that the

Buddha had preached in the previous forty years and more, the dragon king's daughter could not possibly become a Buddha. And yet in the end their arguments were of no avail, and in fact she did become a Buddha.

Thus the passage in the Buddha's first sutra declaring that women "can destroy the seeds of Buddhahood," and that in his final sermon in the sal grove about how "all rivers and streams are invariably winding and devious," were utterly contradicted, and the views reflected in the Silver-Colored Woman Sutra and *Great Perfection of Wisdom* were proven to be nonsense. Wisdom Accumulated and Shariputra were obliged to still their tongues and shut their mouths, while all the human and heavenly beings present at the great gathering where the Lotus Sutra was preached pressed their palms together in an excess of joy. All this was due entirely to the virtue of the single character *myo*.

In this southern continent of Jambudvīpa there are twenty-five hundred rivers, and every single one of them is winding. They are devious like the minds of the women of Jambudvīpa. And yet there is one river called the Sahaya³⁷ that follows a course as straight as a taut rope, flowing directly into the western sea. A woman who has faith in the Lotus Sutra will be like this river, proceeding directly to the Pure Land in the west.³⁸ Such is the virtue inherent in the single character *myo*.

Myo means to revive, that is, to return to life. For example, it is said that, though the chick of a yellow crane may die, if the mother crane calls the name of Tzu-an,³⁹ then the dead chick will come back to life. Or, in the case of the fish and shellfish that have been killed because a poisonous bird called a chen⁴⁰ has entered the water, it is said that, if they are touched with a rhinoceros horn, they will all be brought back to life. Similarly, persons

of the two vehicles, icchantikas, and women were described in the sutras that preceded the Lotus Sutra as having scorched and killed the seeds that would have allowed them to become Buddhas. But by holding fast to this single character *myo*, they can revive these scorched seeds of Buddhahood.

T'ien-t'ai says: "The icchantikas, or persons of incorrigible disbelief, nevertheless have minds, and so it is still possible for them to attain Buddhahood. But persons of the two vehicles have annihilated consciousness, and therefore cannot arouse the mind that aspires to enlightenment. And yet the Lotus Sutra can cure them, which is why it is called *myo*, or wonderful."⁴¹ Miao-lo says: "The reason that the other sutras are called 'great' but not *myo* is simply that it is easy to cure those who have a mind, but difficult to cure those who are without a mind. Because it [the Lotus Sutra] can cure what is thought to be incurable, it is called *myo*, or wonderful."⁴²

These passages refer to the fact that sutras such as the Great and Vast Buddha Flower Garland Sutra, the Great Collection Sutra, the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra, and the Great Nirvana Sutra all have the character "great" in their titles but not the character *myo*, or wonderful. This is because they can only cure the living but are unable to cure the dead. The Lotus Sutra, however, can cure the dead as well as the living, and therefore it has the character *myo* in its title [Myoho-enge-kyo].

Thus, with the other sutras, persons who should by rights become Buddhas cannot do so. But with the Lotus Sutra, even those who would ordinarily find it impossible to do so can attain Buddhahood, not to mention those for whom it is relatively easy. This being the case, in the time since the Lotus Sutra was preached, there ought not to be a single person who adheres to the other sutras.

Now the two thousand years of the Former and Middle Days of the Law have passed, and we have entered the Latter Day of the Law. In such an age, it is a hundred, thousand, ten thousand, million times more difficult for ordinary people to attain Buddhahood or rebirth in the pure land than it was for even the persons of the two vehicles or icchantikas who lived when the Buddha was alive. And yet people nowadays think that, by relying on the Meditation Sutra or some other of the sutras preached in the more than forty years before the Lotus Sutra, they can escape the sufferings of birth and death. How futile, how utterly futile!

Women, whether they live at the time of the Buddha or in the Former, Middle, or Latter Day of the Law, cannot attain Buddhahood through any teaching but the Lotus Sutra. None of the other sutras expounded by any of the Buddhas anywhere can help them. The Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai Chih-che, who heard the Buddha's teachings at Eagle Peak⁴³ and later attained an awakening in the place of meditation, has stated unequivocally, "The other sutras only predict Buddhahood . . . for men, but not for women; . . . This sutra predicts Buddhahood for all."⁴⁴

The Thus Come One Shakyamuni, in the presence of Many Treasures Buddha and the Buddhas of the ten directions, preached the Lotus Sutra over a period of eight years at the place called Eagle Peak northeast of Rajagriha in the kingdom of Magadha. The Great Teacher [T'ien-t'ai] Chih-che was present and heard him preach. "During my fifty years of teaching," said the Buddha, "I have preached various sacred doctrines, all in order to bring benefit to living beings. In the sutras of the first forty-two years, I taught that it was not possible for women to attain Buddhahood. But now with the Lotus Sutra, I declare that women can become Buddhas."

Northeast of Eagle Peak, at a distance of some 108,000 *ri* beyond the mountains and seas, there is a country called Mahachina [in Sanskrit]. We know it as China. Some fifteen hundred years after the Buddha's passing, there appeared in this country a messenger of the Buddha called the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai Chih-che, who declared that women could never attain Buddhahood through any teaching other than the Lotus Sutra.

Three thousand *ri* to the east of China, there is a country called Japan. Some two hundred years after the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai passed away, he was reborn in this country and bore the name of the Great Teacher Dengyo.⁴⁵ He then wrote a work entitled *The Outstanding Principles of the Lotus Sutra* in which he stated: "Neither teacher nor disciples need undergo countless kalpas of austere practice in order to attain Buddhahood. Through the power of the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law they can do so in their present form." Thus he made clear why the dragon king's daughter was able to become a Buddha.

It may seem somewhat difficult for women of the age we live in to attain Buddhahood in their present form. But if they put their trust in the Lotus Sutra, there is no doubt that they will be reborn in the Pure Land of Perfect Bliss. They will reach it more readily than the rivers and streams flowing into the great ocean, or more swiftly than the rain falling from the sky.

And yet we find that the women throughout Japan do not chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Instead they put their faith in works such as the Two-Volumed Sutra or the Meditation Sutra, which can never lead women to the pure land or to Buddhahood. They intone the name of the Buddha Amida sixty thousand or a hundred thousand times a day. Amida is indeed the name of a Buddha, and to invoke it would

seem to be a laudable practice. But because the women who do so are relying upon sutras that can never lead women to Buddhahood or to rebirth in the pure land, they are in effect merely counting other people's riches. This comes about solely because they are led astray by evil teachers. All the women of Japan face an enemy more fearful than tigers or wolves, mountain bandits or pirates at sea, their parents' foes or their husbands' concubines. Their real enemies are those who, instead of teaching them the Lotus Sutra, teach them the Nembutsu.

Only after chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo sixty thousand, a hundred thousand, or even ten million times a day, may women who put their faith in the Lotus Sutra, if they still have some time to spare, now and then murmur to themselves the name of Amida or one of the other Buddhas. But women these days spend their whole lives constantly reciting the name of Amida and busying themselves with matters concerning the Nembutsu. They never recite the Lotus Sutra or give alms for its sake. True, there are a few who have the Lotus Sutra read by those who uphold its teachings. But they look up to the Nembutsu priests as though they

were their parents or brothers, and treat the upholders of the Lotus Sutra with less respect than they would their retainers or followers. And yet they claim that they are believers in the Lotus Sutra.

By contrast, Lady Pure Virtue gave permission for her sons, the two princes, to enter the Buddhist Order and encouraged them to propagate the Lotus Sutra. Moreover, the dragon king's daughter took a vow, saying, "I unfold the doctrines of the great vehicle to rescue living beings from suffering."⁴⁶ These women surely took no vow to practice only the teachings of the other sutras and to neglect the practice of the Lotus Sutra. Nevertheless, that is what the women of today do, paying all their attention to the practice of other sutras and none to that of the Lotus Sutra. You must reform your thinking immediately. Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, Nam-myoho-enge-kyo.

Nichiren

Completed at the hour of the sheep (1:00–3:00 P.M.) at Seicho-ji temple on the sixth day of the first month in the third year of Bun'ei (1266), cyclical sign *hinoe-tora*.



Background

This letter was written in the first month, 1266, for a woman of advanced years. Nothing is known about her other than that she was a new believer in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and lived in Amatsu of Awa Province. This letter explains in plain terms the rewards of the simple practice of Nam-myoho-enge-kyo by saying that this phrase and its components contain all the powers of the Buddha, and that one who chants it can tap all the benefits of

Buddhism and thus revitalize one's life.

In the fall of 1264, one year after he had been pardoned from his exile in Izu, Nichiren Daishonin returned to his birthplace in Awa Province. News of his mother's grave illness and the lessening of official pressures prompted his decision to return home. However, Tojo Kagenobu, the steward of this district and a passionate believer in the Nembutsu, was still incensed over the Daishonin's refutation of the Pure Land

teachings eleven years earlier and was lying in wait for him.

The Daishonin's primary concern was to visit his mother, and their reunion seems to have had a great effect upon her and she quickly recovered. Kudo Yoshitaka and the other disciples in the area were anxious to see him and urged him to visit Kudo's manor. On the eleventh day of the eleventh month, 1264, accompanied by messengers sent to guide them, the group set out. When they reached a place known as Komatsubara, they were ambushed by Tojo Kagenobu and his Nembutsu followers. Kudo, who came rushing to the Daishonin's aid, and another disciple lost their lives. The Daishonin suffered a sword slash on his forehead and had his left hand broken.

At considerable personal risk, the Daishonin remained in Awa from 1264 through 1267 and conducted vigorous propagation activities, working with and among the people. In 1266, the Daishonin stayed for a while at his old temple, Seicho-ji, where he wrote several doctrinal treatises, including the present letter.

This letter consists of two sections. In the first section, the Daishonin addresses the question of whether or not one can benefit from chanting the daimoku (Nam-myoho-enge-kyo) without understanding the meaning of the Lotus Sutra, and stresses the necessity of faith in attaining Buddhahood.

Citing the examples of Mahakashyapa and Shariputra, he states that, even without understanding, one can eradicate any evil karma and accumulate boundless benefit, as long as one carries out the practice of chanting the daimoku with firm faith.

In the second section, the Daishonin clarifies the great blessings contained in the five characters of Myoho-enge-kyo, the title of the Lotus Sutra. He explains three meanings of the character *myo*: to open, to be fully endowed, and to revive. Finally, he states that only the Lotus Sutra enables women to attain Buddhahood, and urges the recipient of this letter to chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo and forsake her attachment to the Nembutsu.

At the beginning of this letter, the Daishonin calls himself a "follower of the Great Teacher Kompon." Kompon, meaning fundamental, is another name for the Great Teacher Dengyo. He was the founder of the Japanese Tendai school, which he based on the teachings of T'ien-t'ai of China. He traveled to China to master T'ien-t'ai's doctrines and, after returning to Japan, repudiated all the schools based on the Buddha's provisional teachings and devoted himself to propagating the Lotus Sutra. The phrase "follower of the Great Teacher Kompon" implies that the Daishonin is the legitimate successor to the Buddha's teaching contained in the Lotus Sutra.

Notes

1. This story appears in the Sutra on the Wise and the Foolish. According to the sutra, while Shakyamuni was staying at Shravasti, his disciple Ananda one day taught the four noble truths to two parrots kept at the house of the Buddha's patron Sudatta. That evening, an animal attacked and ate them, but they were said to have been reborn in the heaven of the four heavenly kings because of the benefit obtained by repeating the four noble truths.

2. This story appears in the Great Compassion Sutra. According to the sutra, once when a merchant was sailing the ocean, a huge fish called a makara was about to swallow up his ship. Although the other people aboard were in despair, he fixed his mind upon the three treasures and called upon the mercy of all the Buddhas. Seeing him, the others joined him in sincere prayers with their palms joined, and the makara ceased attacking them.

3. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.
4. The eighteen miraculous powers are a variety of actions and appearances that Buddhas and bodhisattvas manifest in order to lead people to enlightenment. Explanations vary depending on the sutra.
5. Lotus Sutra, chap. 15.
6. The Nirvana Sutra says, "Though the plantain grows with the rumbling of thunder, it has neither the ears to hear it nor the mind to feel it." The sight of plantains refreshed after a thundershower may well have given rise to the belief that "the plantain grows with the rumbling of thunder."
7. According to *Pao-p'u Tzu*, when put into the water, a rhinoceros horn made into the form of a fish keeps the water away by three feet.
8. The banyan tree, which is found in tropical and subtropical Asiatic regions, usually around thirty to forty feet tall. Its abundant foliage offers cool shade from the sun.
9. An imaginary bird. It is also said to be the name of a kind of worm. The source of this passage has not been traced.
10. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.
11. *Ibid*, chap. 14.
12. A Buddha mentioned in the Larger Wisdom Sutra and *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*.
13. According to *The Record of Wonders in the Book of Chou*, Shakyamuni died on the fifteenth day of the second month in the fifty-second year of the reign of King Mu (949 B.C.E.) of the Chou dynasty.
14. The eighty-volume Flower Garland Sutra, called the new translation, was translated by Shikshananda (652-710) in the T'ang dynasty, and the sixty-volume Flower Garland Sutra, called the old translation, was translated by Buddhahadra (359-429) in the Eastern Chin dynasty.
15. The five characters of *a*, *va*, *ra*, *ha*, and *kha* indicate, respectively, the five universal elements of earth, water, fire, wind, and space. The esoteric True Word school holds this to be one of the secret truths revealed by Mahavairocana Buddha. This one word was used as a mantra (secret word or syllable) and was said to express the Buddha's quality, wisdom, appearance, and practice.
16. The seeds refer here to Sanskrit orthographic symbols used to represent various Buddhas and bodhisattvas in the esoteric teaching. The samayas are various

attributes of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, in particular, their vows to lead all people to supreme enlightenment. The term is often used in the esoteric teaching.

17. The seven Buddhas of the past are Shakyamuni and the six Buddhas who preceded him.

18. *The Annotations on "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra."*

19. Lotus Sutra, chap. 10.

20. Preface by Chang-an to *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*.

21. *The Annotations on "The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra."*

22. The mystic principle of the theoretical teaching is that the Buddha discards the provisional teachings and reveals the true teaching, the Lotus Sutra, which allows people of the two vehicles to attain Buddhahood. The mystic principle of the essential teaching is that the Buddha discards his transient status and reveals his true identity as the Buddha who attained enlightenment countless kalpas ago.

23. Principles set forth by T'ien-t'ai in his *Profound Meaning*. The ten mystic principles of the theoretical teaching are based on the concepts of the true aspect of all phenomena and the replacement of the three vehicles with the one vehicle of Buddhahood. The ten mystic principles of the essential teaching are set forth on the basis of the revelation of the Buddha's original enlightenment numberless major world system dust particle kalpas ago, as expounded in the "Life Span" chapter.

24. Added to each of the two sets of ten mystic principles—the ten mystic principles of the theoretical teaching and the ten mystic principles of the essential teaching—are the ten mystic principles grasped from the relative standpoint and the ten mystic principles grasped from the absolute, or all-encompassing, standpoint.

25. Thirty mystic principles related to the life of sentient beings, the Buddhist Law, and the nature of one's mind, or the Law within, plus ten in either the theoretical teaching or the essential teaching.

26. To perceive or awaken to the ultimate reality inherent in one's life. This is particularly stressed in T'ien-t'ai's practice, in which meditation is focused on the true nature of one's mind rather than some exterior object.

27. *The Annotations on "Great Concentration and Insight."*

28. This refers to the two of the five groups into which people are by nature divided according to the Dharma Characteristics school. People in these two groups can eventually attain the state of arhat and that of pratyekabuddha, respectively.

29. This refers to non-Buddhists who held fast to the view of void, denying the causal law, and, according to the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings of Buddhism, could not attain Buddhahood.

30. Sudaya was a Brahman master who taught Devadatta occult powers, according to the Increasing by One Agama Sutra.

31. Here, austerities established and practiced by Devadatta. According to *The Great Commentary on the Abhidharma*, they were: (1) wearing only clothing discarded by others after washing and mending it; (2) obtaining food only by begging; (3) eating only once a day; (4) always seating oneself outside under a tree; and (5) never eating salt or other food possessing the five tastes.

32. A mountain whose summit resembled an elephant's head, located about 1.5 km southwest of Gaya in Magadha. In China it was translated as the Elephant-Headed Mountain.

33. The circle formed first when a world takes shape and living beings appear in it in the kalpa of formation. According to *The Dharma Analysis Treasury*, the power of the karma of living beings first causes a small wind to arise in space. This wind grows and forms the windy circle thought to lie at the base of a world. Upon this circle a watery circle and then a gold circle take shape, and upon them the land itself is formed, with its Mount Sumeru, seas, and mountains.

34. The two divisions of the threefold world, the realm where unenlightened beings transmigrate within the six paths. Beings in the world of form have material form but are free from desires, and those in the world of formlessness are free from both desire and the restrictions of matter.

35. Mo Hsi of the Hsia dynasty, Ta Chi of the Yin dynasty, and Pao Ssu of the Chou dynasty. All were favorites of the

ruler and helped bring about the downfall of the state.

36. This statement is not found in the extant Chinese versions of the Flower Garland Sutra. However, *A Collection of Treasures* written by Taira no Yasuyori during the Jisho era (1177-1181) cites it as a quotation from the Flower Garland Sutra.

37. A legendary river in the continent of Aparagodaniya located to the west of Mount Sumeru.

38. The Daishonin elsewhere teaches that faith in the Lotus Sutra will enable anyone, man or woman, to attain Buddhahood in one's present form as an ordinary mortal. However, because the recipient of this letter was still strongly attached to the views of the Pure Land school, the Daishonin explained his teaching in a way that she could readily understand.

39. A figure described in a Chinese legend. When he saw a yellow crane being sold on the road, he felt pity for it, offered his clothes in exchange for it, and set it free. When he died, the crane flew down to his grave and continued calling his name for three years. As a result, he came back to life.

40. A hawk-like bird with poisonous feathers that appears in Chinese works.

41. *Great Concentration and Insight*.

42. On "Great Concentration and Insight."

43. T'ien-t'ai is said to have been the reincarnation of Bodhisattva Medicine King, who was present at the assembly on Eagle Peak, because he attained an awakening through the "Medicine King" chapter of the Lotus Sutra.

44. *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*.

45. In the early ninth century, Dengyo went to China and learned the T'ien-t'ai teachings. After returning to Japan, he established the Tendai (Chin T'ien-t'ai) school and devoted himself to upholding T'ien-t'ai Buddhism. It is said that Tao-sui, one of Dengyo's masters in China, identified him as the reincarnation of T'ien-t'ai, referring to T'ien-t'ai's prediction.

46. Lotus Sutra, chap. 12.