

Reply to Hoshina Goro Taro



AFTER Emperor Ming of the Han dynasty dreamed at night [of a golden man and dispatched emissaries to the western region],¹ the two sages, Kashyapa Matanga and Chu Falan, came to China and stood for the first time at the gates of Ch'ang-an. From that time until the reign of Emperor Hsüan-tsung of the T'ang dynasty, the Buddhist teachings of India spread throughout China. During the Liang dynasty, Buddhism was first introduced to Japan by King Syöngmyöng of the Korean kingdom of Paekche. This occurred during the reign of Kimmei, the thirtieth emperor of our country. Thereafter, all the sutras and treatises were circulated widely, and various Buddhist schools arose throughout Japan. How fortunate it is, then, that even though we were born in the Latter Day of the Law we are able to hear the teachings preached at Eagle Peak, and even though we live in a remote corner of the world we are able to scoop up with our hands the water of the great river of Buddhism.

A close examination, however, shows that there are distinctions to be made among the Buddha's teachings, such as the Hinayana and the Mahayana or the provisional and true teachings, or those of the sequence of preaching. If you are confused about these distinctions, you will fall into erroneous views, and even

though you may practice Buddhism, your offense will outweigh that of committing the ten evil acts or the five cardinal sins. For this reason, if you abhor the secular world and seek the Buddhist way, you should understand this standard of evaluation before anything else. Otherwise, you are destined to follow the path of the monk Shore of Suffering and other slanderers. As the Nirvana Sutra says, "If one clings to distorted views, at the time of death one will surely fall into the Avichi hell."

Question: How can we discern the error of distorted views? Although I am not wise enough, I am nevertheless anxious about my next life and have resolved to seek the Buddhist teachings to the best of my ability. Therefore, I wish to know this standard of evaluation by all means. Should it be that I am adhering to distorted views, I will reflect on them and turn to the correct view.

Answer: It can be neither discerned with our physical eyes nor perceived with our shallow wisdom. We should use the sutras as our eyes and give precedence to the wisdom of the Buddha. Surely, however, if this standard is made clear, people will become enraged and be filled with resentment. Let them do as they will. What matters most is that we honor the Buddha's words. As a rule, people in the world value what is

distant and despise what is near, but this is the conduct of the ignorant. Even the distant should be repudiated if it is wrong, while what is near should not be discarded if it accords with the truth. Even though people may revere [their predecessors' doctrines], if those doctrines are in error, how can we employ them today?

I am told that the scholars of the ten schools—three in southern China and seven in northern China—were so outstanding in authority and virtue that they were revered throughout the land for more than five hundred years. However, the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai, who lived during the reigns of emperors of the Ch'en and Sui dynasties, examined their doctrines and denounced them as erroneous. Hearing of this, the people hated him intensely; but the Ch'en and Sui emperors,² being worthy rulers, summoned T'ien-t'ai to debate with the priests of the ten schools and settle the matter. Truth and error were thereby made clear, and in consequence, the priests all revised the distorted views that their schools had upheld over a period of five hundred years and became followers of the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai. And in our own country, the Great Teacher Kompon [Dengyo] of Mount Hiei debated with the learned scholars of Nara and Kyoto and distinguished between right and wrong in the Buddhist teachings. In every case, T'ien-t'ai and Dengyo based their arguments on the sutras.

However, the people of our time—whether clerics or lay believers, nobles or commoners—all revere persons and do not value the Law. They make their own mind their teacher and do not rely on the sutras. Consequently, they take up the provisional teachings of the Nembutsu and discard the wonderful scripture of the great vehicle, or employ the erroneous doctrines of the True Word school to slander the correct teaching of the one true vehicle.

Are they not slanderers of the great vehicle? If what is written in the sutras is true, how can they escape the sufferings of hell? And those who follow their distorted teachings will also suffer the same fate.

Question: You claim that the Nembutsu and the True Word schools uphold provisional or erroneous doctrines, and that their practitioners are people of distorted views or slanderers of the Law. This seems very doubtful. The Great Teacher Kobo was a manifestation of Vajrasattva and a bodhisattva of the third stage of development.³ The True Word doctrine is the most profound secret teaching. Moreover, the Reverend Shan-tao was an incarnation of the Thus Come One Amida, the lord of the Western Land, and the Honorable Honen was an incarnation of Bodhisattva Great Power. How can you call such honorable priests men of erroneous views?

Answer: Such criticism must of course not be leveled on the grounds of personal opinion; the matter must be clarified on the basis of the sutras. The statement that the True Word teaching represents the most profound of all secrets derives from the assertion that the Susiddhikara Sutra should be ranked as the king among the three True Word sutras.⁴ Nowhere in the sutras themselves do we read that the True Word teaching is the highest of all the Thus Come Ones' teachings.

In Buddhism, that teaching is judged supreme that enables all people, whether good or evil, to become Buddhas. Surely anyone can grasp so reasonable a standard. By means of this principle, we can compare the various sutras and ascertain which is superior. The Lotus Sutra reveals that even the people of the two vehicles can attain enlightenment, but the True Word sutras do not. Rather, they categorically deny it. The Lotus Sutra teaches that women are capable of attaining Buddhahood, but

the True Word sutras make no mention of this at all. In the Lotus Sutra, it is written that evil people can attain enlightenment, but in the True Word sutras there is nothing about this. How can one say that the True Word sutras are superior to the Lotus Sutra?

Moreover, if we consider this in light of the omens occurring at the time of preaching, there were six portents that preceded the preaching of the Lotus Sutra. Among them, flowers rained down from the heavens, the earth trembled, and a ray of light emanated from the tuft of white hair between the Buddha's eyebrows, reaching as high as the Summit of Being heaven and illuminating as deep as the Avichi hell. Moreover, the tower of Many Treasures Buddha rose from the earth, and the Buddhas who are emanations of Shakyamuni Buddha assembled from the ten directions. In addition, the Bodhisattvas of the Earth led by Superior Practices emerged from beneath the earth, each with a retinue equal in number to the sands of sixty thousand Ganges Rivers, fifty thousand, forty thousand, thirty thousand, and so forth, down to the sands of one Ganges, one half, and so forth. When such awesome and wondrous events are considered, how can one still maintain that the True Word sutras surpass the Lotus Sutra? I have no time to dwell on these matters. I have brought up only one drop of the ocean.

I have here a copy of the one-volume work called *The Treatise on the Mind Aspiring for Enlightenment*, which is attributed to Bodhisattva Nagarjuna. This work says: "Only in the True Word teachings can one attain Buddhahood in one's present form, because these teachings expound the practice of samadhi meditation. No such exposition is to be found in the other types of teachings." As I thought this statement extremely doubtful, I examined it in light of the sutras. I discovered that,

although the True Word sutras contained the words "attaining Buddhahood in one's present form," they gave no example of anyone who had actually done so. Even if they had, because the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form is also taught in the Lotus Sutra, Nagarjuna should not have proclaimed that "no such exposition is to be found in the other types of teachings." This is a gross error.

In truth, however, this treatise is not the work of Nagarjuna. I will explain this in detail on another occasion. Yet even if it were the work of Bodhisattva Nagarjuna, an error is still an error. In his *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, Nagarjuna refers to a vital point in differentiating among the teachings expounded by Shakyamuni Buddha during his lifetime: "The Wisdom sutras are not secret teachings because they contain no mention of the attainment of Buddhahood by persons of the two vehicles. The Lotus Sutra is a secret teaching because it does." He also says, "Those sutras that expound the attainment of Buddhahood by those of the two vehicles are secret teachings, and those that do not are exoteric teachings."

If one goes by the words of *Mind Aspiring for Enlightenment*, then one must not only specifically contradict Nagarjuna's *Great Perfection of Wisdom*, but more generally deny the one great reason why the Buddhas make their advent in the world. Nagarjuna, Vasubandhu, and others all appeared in this world in order to propagate the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha. Nagarjuna was one of the Buddha's twenty-four successors. Could he really have put forth such an erroneous interpretation?

The True Word sutras are inferior even to the Wisdom sutras. How can we compare them with the Lotus Sutra? Nevertheless, in his *Precious Key to the Secret Treasury*, Kobo claims that all of the Buddha's lifetime teachings

are contained within the True Word teachings. He not only relegates the Lotus Sutra to third place, but even dismisses it as “a doctrine of childish theory.” Yet, when I reverently open the Lotus Sutra, I find that the Buddha declares it to be “foremost among all that is preached by the Thus Come Ones,”⁵ as well as the sutra supreme “among the sutras I have preached, now preach, and will preach.”⁶ In the ten similes of the “Medicine King” chapter, the Lotus Sutra is likened to the ocean, the sun, and Mount Sumeru. This being the case, could anything be deeper than the ocean, brighter than the sun, or higher than Mount Sumeru? You should realize the truth through such similes. On what basis can Kobo claim that the True Word sutras are superior to the Lotus Sutra? We find no such passages whatsoever in the Mahavairochana or other sutras. Trusting only to his own view, he has forever violated the Buddha’s intention.

The Great Teacher Miao-lo states, “I call upon those with eyes to examine this thoroughly.”⁷ Is one not without eyes who regards the Lotus Sutra as inferior to the Flower Garland Sutra? The Nirvana Sutra reads, “If there are persons who slander the correct teaching of the Buddha, their tongues should be cut off.” Ah, how pitiful that those slandering tongues will utter no words in world after world, and that the eyes clouded by false views will fall out in lifetime after lifetime, seeing nothing! Moreover, the Lotus Sutra says: “If a person fails to have faith but instead slanders this sutra . . . When his life comes to an end he will enter the Avichi hell.”⁸ If this statement is valid, Kobo will surely fall into the great citadel of the hell of incessant suffering where he will undergo agony for immeasurable millions of kalpas. You should also recognize the fate of Shan-tao and Honen through his example. Who among those endowed with wis-

dom will dip into the stream of such slanderous teachings and be consumed together with these men in the flames of the Avichi hell? Truly, the practitioners of Buddhism should fear this. These are all persons of profoundly distorted views. In this connection, we find, among the true and golden words of the Thus Come One: “[This devil king Papiyas will in time try] to destroy the correct teaching of mine. He will be like a hunter who wraps his body in a priestly robe. He will change his form into that of a stream-winner, a once-returner, a non-returner, an arhat,⁹ a pratyekabuddha, or a Buddha, and will try to destroy the correct teaching of mine.”¹⁰

Shan-tao and Honen, displaying a variety of majestic powers, deceived ignorant priests and lay believers and schemed to destroy the Thus Come One’s correct teaching. The followers of the True Word school in particular make it a point to emphasize worldly benefits exclusively. Using animals as objects of devotion, they conduct prayers not only to satisfy the amorous passions of man and woman, but also to fulfill desires for manors and the like. They claim such trifling results as wondrous benefits. However, if they are going to assert the supremacy of the True Word teachings on these grounds, they are no match for the non-Buddhists of India. The ascetic Agastya kept the waters of the Ganges River in his ear for twelve years. The ascetic Jinu swallowed up the four great oceans in a day, and the non-Buddhist teacher Uluka turned into a stone and remained that way for eight hundred years. How could the results of the True Word school’s prayers surpass these? The ascetic Gautama¹¹ assumed the form of the god Shakra and preached for twelve years, while Kobo transformed himself into Vairochana for an instant. Judge for yourself whose powers are the greater. If you believe

that such transformations are significant, you might just as well believe in the non-Buddhist practitioners.

Yet it should be known that, while the non-Buddhist practitioners possessed such impressive powers, they could not escape the flames of the Avichi hell, not to mention those with only trivial powers of transformation. Even less can slanderers of the great vehicle avoid this fate. The priests of the True Word school are evil friends to all living beings. Avoid them; fear them. The Buddha states: "Have no fear of mad elephants. What you should fear are evil friends! Why? Because a mad elephant can only destroy your body; it cannot destroy your mind. But an evil friend can destroy both body and mind. A mad elephant can destroy only a single body, but an evil friend can destroy countless bodies and countless minds. A mad elephant merely destroys an impure, stinking body, but an evil friend can destroy both pure body and pure mind. A mad elephant can destroy the physical body, but an evil friend destroys the Dharma body. Even if you are killed by a mad

elephant, you will not fall into the three evil paths. But if you are killed by an evil friend, you are certain to fall into them. A mad elephant is merely an enemy of your body, but an evil friend is an enemy of the good Law."¹² Therefore, even more than venomous serpents or malevolent demons, one should fear the evil friends who follow Kobo, Shan-tao, and Honen. This is just a brief clarification of the error of holding distorted views.

The messenger is in such a great hurry that I have written only a small part of what I had to say. When an opportunity arises in the future, I will write to you again, examining sutras and commentaries in detail. Never show this letter to anyone. If I survive until then, I will visit and talk with you in the autumn of next year, as you requested.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The fifth day of the twelfth month
Reply to Hoshina Goro Taro



Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter in the twelfth month of the fourth year of Bun'ei (1267), when he was forty-six years old, and addressed it to Hoshina Goro Taro who lived in Kazusa Province to the north of Awa. Hoshina is said to have been a retainer of Sakuma Hyogo, the lord of Okitsu, and converted to the Daishonin's teaching along with his lord when the Daishonin returned to his native Awa Province in the autumn of 1264.

From this single extant letter addressed to him, we can surmise that Hoshina may have previously been

a follower of the True Word school but had converted to the Daishonin's teaching and had since maintained pure faith.

In this letter, the Daishonin repudiates the Nembutsu and True Word schools, briefly stating the arguments that underlay his later remonstrations with government officials and priests of major temples. First, he points out that there are distinctions of relative superiority to be made among all the Buddhist scriptures, such as Hinayana and Mahayana or provisional and true teachings. Of all the various sutras, the

Lotus Sutra is supreme, yet the priests of the Nembutsu and True Word schools are confused as to the proper criteria of comparison and therefore slander the Lotus Sutra. The Daishonin criticizes their views on the basis of what is written in the sutras themselves, asserting that the scriptural texts,

not personal opinion, form the only valid basis for judgment. In particular, he censures the practices of the priests of the True Word school that aim only at obtaining shallow, worldly benefits. He concludes that one should acknowledge as supreme the sutra that enables all people to attain Buddhahood.

Notes

1. This refers to the tradition that Emperor Ming (28–75) dreamed of a golden man levitating above the garden. He awakened and asked his ministers about the dream. One of them said that he had once heard of the birth of a sage in the western region during the reign of King Chao of the Chou dynasty, and that this sage had been called the Buddha. The emperor sent eighteen envoys to the western region in order to obtain the Buddha's teachings. And, at the request of these envoys, two Indian Buddhist monks came to China in C.E. 67 with Buddhist scriptures and images on the backs of white horses.

2. The Ch'en and Sui emperors refer to Ch'en Shu-pao, the fifth and last sovereign of the Ch'en dynasty, and Emperor Yang Ti, the second sovereign of the Sui dynasty, respectively.

3. The third of the ten stages of development, the stage of the emission of light, in which one radiates the light of wisdom. *See also* fifty-two stages of bodhisattva practice in Glossary.

4. Though the True Word school ranks the Susiddhikara Sutra below its other two main scriptures, Mahavairochana and Diamond Crown, it is especially revered in the

Tendai esotericism established by Jikaku. The Daishonin refers here to Jikaku's assertion that this sutra is the highest of the esoteric scriptures.

5. Lotus Sutra, chap. 14.

6. *Ibid.*, chap. 10.

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

8. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.

9. References are to those who have attained, respectively, the four levels of enlightenment to which voice-hearers in Hinayana Buddhism aspire. In ascending order, they are the stage of the stream-winner (Skt srota-apanna), the stage of the once-returner (sakridagamin), the stage of the non-returner (anagamin), and the stage of arhat. *See also* four stages of Hinayana enlightenment in Glossary.

10. A rephrasing of a passage in the Nirvana Sutra.

11. A hermit of ages past mentioned in the Nirvana Sutra, different from Gautama Buddha, or Shakyamuni. The Nirvana Sutra states: "The ascetic Gautama exhibited great supernatural powers and, for twelve years, transformed himself into the god Shakra . . ."

12. Nirvana Sutra.