

Aspiration for the Buddha Land



IT is now the latter part of the eleventh month. When I was living in Kamakura in Sagami, I thought that the changing of the seasons must be the same in all the provinces, but in the two months that have passed since I arrived in this northern province of Sado, icy winds have blown without pause, and though there have been times when the frost and snow stopped falling, I have never seen the sunlight. I feel the eight cold hells in my life now. The hearts of the people are like those of birds and beasts; they recognize neither sovereign, teacher, nor parent. Even less do they distinguish between correct and incorrect in Buddhism, or good and evil in their teachers. But I will say no more of these things.

When I sent back from Teradomari the lay priest whom you dispatched on the tenth day of the tenth month to accompany me, I wrote out and entrusted to him certain teachings for you.¹ As you may have guessed from these, [the advent of the great Law] is already before our very eyes. In the twenty-two hundred and more years since the Buddha's passing, and in India, China, Japan, and throughout Jambudvīpa, [the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai said], "Vasubandhu and Nagarjuna clearly perceived the truth in their hearts, but they did not teach it. Instead, they employed the provisional

Mahayana teachings, which were suited to the times."² T'ien-t'ai and Dengyo commented generally on it, but left its propagation for the future. The secret Law that is the one great reason the Buddhas make their advent will be spread for the first time in this country. How could Nichiren not be the one who will do this?

The portents of its rise have already appeared. The great earthquake of the Shoka era was a major omen of a kind never before witnessed in previous ages, one totally unprecedented in the twelve reigns of the deities,³ the ninety reigns of human sovereigns,⁴ and the twenty-two hundred and more years since the Buddha's passing. The "Supernatural Powers" chapter of the Lotus Sutra states, "Because after the Buddha has passed into extinction there will be those who can uphold this sutra, the Buddhas are all delighted and manifest immeasurable supernatural powers." It also refers to "all the doctrines possessed by the Thus Come One." Once this great Law has spread, I am sure neither the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings nor the theoretical teaching of the Lotus will provide even the slightest benefit. The Great Teacher Dengyo said that when the sun comes up the stars hide themselves.⁵ And the preface written by Tsun-shih⁶ says that, at the beginning of the Latter Day of

the Law, [Buddhism will rise in the east and] illuminate the west. The Law has already appeared. The signs heralding its advent far surpass those of previous ages. When I gave this some thought, I realized that it is because the time has so decreed it. The sutra states, “[Among these bodhisattvas] were four leaders. The first was called Superior Practices . . .”⁷ It also reads, “In the evil age of the Latter Day of the Law if there is someone who can uphold this sutra . . .,”⁸ and “If you were to seize Mount Sumeru and fling it far off . . . [that too would not be difficult].”⁹

I would like you to gather and keep in one place the five folding notebooks I mentioned to you, which contain essential passages from the complete collection of the scriptures and from *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*. Please make sure that the essential passages from the treatises and commen-

taries are not scattered and lost. And please tell the young priests that they should not neglect their studies. You absolutely must not lament over my exile. It says in the “Encouraging Devotion” chapter and in the “Never Disparaging” chapter [that the votary of the Lotus Sutra will meet with persecution]. Life is limited; we must not begrudge it. What we should ultimately aspire to is the Buddha land.

Nichiren

The twenty-third day of the eleventh month in the eighth year of Bun’ei (1271)

Reply to the lay priest Toki

I am sending back some of the young priests. You can ask them what this province is like and about the circumstances in which I live. It is impossible to describe these matters in writing.



Background

On the twenty-eighth day of the tenth month, 1271, Nichiren Daishonin arrived at Sado Island. On the first day of the eleventh month, he was taken to Tsukahara, a desolate field used as a graveyard that was to be his dwelling place on Sado. He was given as lodging a small dilapidated shrine called Sammai-do. Wind and snow blew in through gaping holes in its walls and roof. Perhaps because of the severe lack of food and shelter, the Daishonin soon sent back to the mainland some of the priests who had accompanied him. Just before their departure, he wrote this letter and entrusted it to them for his staunch follower Toki Jonin. It is believed to be the first letter he wrote from Sado Island.

While the Daishonin was in exile on Sado, he relied on Toki to convey mes-

sages of encouragement to believers in the Shimoso area. This particular letter indicates that he had also asked Toki to look after his books and papers during his absence.

In the letter, he voices his readiness to meet death if necessary for the sake of the Lotus Sutra, and his joy at knowing himself to be the sutra’s votary. He also declares that the supreme Law never before revealed by any of the great Buddhist teachers of the past has now made its advent. He interprets the great Shoka earthquake of 1257 as an omen of its rise, and cites various passages from the Lotus Sutra and other sources to substantiate his assertion that now, the beginning of the Latter Day, is the time for this great Law to spread.

In the last few lines of the letter, the

Daishonin explains that, since life in this world is transient, one should dedicate oneself to the Law. Rather than fleeting satisfactions, one's ultimate goal should

be to attain "the Buddha land," or enlightenment—that state of boundless joy in which one realizes the eternal truth within one's life.

Notes

1. This refers to *Letter from Teradomari*, which the Daishonin wrote to Toki Jonin on the twenty-second day of the tenth month, 1271.

2. *Great Concentration and Insight*.

3. The twelve reigns of the deities refer to the seven reigns of the heavenly deities and the five reigns of the earthly deities said to have ruled Japan before Emperor Jimmu, the legendary first human sovereign.

4. The ninety reigns of human sovereigns refer to the successive emperors from the legendary first sovereign, Emperor Jimmu (r. 660–585 B.C.E., according to *The Chronicles of Japan*), to the ninetieth emperor, Kameyama (r. 1259–1274).

5. In *The Verse-form Record of the Lineage of the Tendai Lotus School*, the Great Teacher Dengyo uses the sun to represent the Lotus Sutra, and the stars to represent the provisional teachings. Here the Daishonin uses the sun to represent the Law of Nam-

myoho-rence-kyo, and the stars to represent both the provisional teachings and the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra.

6. Tsun-shih was a priest of the T'ien-t'ai school in Sung-dynasty China. Tsun-shih's "preface" is his introduction to *The Mahayana Method of Concentration and Insight* by T'ien-t'ai's teacher, Nan-yüeh. Nan-yüeh's work had been lost for centuries in China, but a copy was brought from Japan by Jakusho, a priest of the Japanese Tendai school, when he traveled to China at the beginning of the eleventh century. Therefore Tsun-shih said that Buddhism "rises in the east."

7. Lotus Sutra, chap. 15.

8. *Ibid.*, chap. 17.

9. *Ibid.*, chap. 11. This passage teaches how difficult it will be to embrace and propagate the sutra in the Latter Day of the Law.