

The Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life

Written by Nichiren



I HAVE just carefully read your letter. To reply, the ultimate Law of life and death as transmitted from the Buddha to all living beings is Myoho-enge-kyo. The five characters of Myoho-enge-kyo were transferred from Shakyamuni and Many Treasures, the two Buddhas inside the treasure tower, to Bodhisattva Superior Practices, carrying on a heritage unbroken since the infinite past. *Myo* represents death, and *ho*, life. Living beings that pass through the two phases of life and death are the entities of the Ten Worlds, or the entities of Myoho-enge-kyo.

T'ien-t'ai says that one should understand that living beings and their environments, and the causes and effects at work within them, are all the Law of *rengé* (the lotus).¹ Here "living beings and their environments" means the phenomena of life and death. Thus, it is clear that, where life and death exist, cause and effect, or the Law of the lotus, is at work.

The Great Teacher Dengyo states, "The two phases of life and death are the wonderful workings of one mind. The two ways of existence and non-existence are the true functions of an inherently enlightened mind."² No phenomena—either heaven or earth, yin or yang,³ the sun or the moon, the five planets,⁴ or any of the worlds from

hell to Buddhahood—are free from the two phases of life and death. Life and death are simply the two functions of Myoho-enge-kyo. In his *Great Concentration and Insight*, T'ien-t'ai says, "Arising is the arising of the essential nature of the Law, and extinction is the extinction of that nature." Shakyamuni and Many Treasures, the two Buddhas, are also the two phases of life and death.

Shakyamuni Buddha who attained enlightenment countless kalpas ago, the Lotus Sutra that leads all people to Buddhahood, and we ordinary human beings are in no way different or separate from one another. To chant Myoho-enge-kyo with this realization is to inherit the ultimate Law of life and death. This is a matter of the utmost importance for Nichiren's disciples and lay supporters, and this is what it means to embrace the Lotus Sutra.

For one who summons up one's faith and chants Nam-myoho-enge-kyo with the profound insight that now is the last moment of one's life, the sutra proclaims: "When the lives of these persons come to an end, they will be received into the hands of a thousand Buddhas, who will free them from all fear and keep them from falling into the evil paths of existence."⁵ How can we possibly hold back our tears at the inexpressible joy of know-

ing that not just one or two, not just one hundred or two hundred, but as many as a thousand Buddhas will come to greet us with open arms!

Concerning one who disbelieves the Lotus Sutra, because the sutra states, "When his life comes to an end he will enter the Avichi hell,"⁶ the wardens of hell will surely come for one and take one away by the hands. How pitiful! The ten kings⁷ of the world of the dead will then pass judgment, and the heavenly messengers⁸ who have been with one since birth will berate one for one's evil deeds.

Think of those thousand Buddhas extending their hands to all of Nichiren's disciples and lay supporters who chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo as melons or moonflowers extending their slender vines. My followers are now able to accept and uphold the Lotus Sutra because of the strong ties they formed with it in their past existences. They are certain to obtain the fruit of Buddhahood in the future. The heritage of the Lotus Sutra flows within the lives of those who never forsake it in any lifetime whatsoever—whether in the past, the present, or the future. But those who disbelieve and slander the Lotus Sutra will immediately "destroy all the seeds for becoming a Buddha in this world."⁹ Because they cut themselves off from the potential to attain enlightenment, they do not share the heritage of the ultimate Law of life and death.

All disciples and lay supporters of Nichiren should chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo with the spirit of many in body but one in mind, transcending all differences among themselves¹⁰ to become as inseparable as fish and the water in which they swim. This spiritual bond is the basis for the universal transmission of the ultimate Law of life and death. Herein lies the true goal of Nichiren's propagation. When you are so united, even the great desire for

widespread propagation can be fulfilled. But if any of Nichiren's disciples disrupt the unity of many in body but one in mind, they would be like warriors who destroy their own castle from within.

Nichiren has been trying to awaken all the people of Japan to faith in the Lotus Sutra so that they too can share the heritage and attain Buddhahood. But instead they have persecuted me in various ways and finally had me banished to this island. You have followed Nichiren, however, and met with suffering as a result. It pains me deeply to think of your anguish. Gold can be neither burned by fire nor corroded or swept away by water, but iron is vulnerable to both. A worthy person is like gold, a fool like iron. You are like pure gold because you embrace the "gold" of the Lotus Sutra. The sutra states, "Just as among all the mountains, Mount Sumeru is foremost, so this Lotus Sutra is likewise."¹¹ It also states, "The good fortune you gain thereby . . . cannot be burned by fire or washed away by water."¹²

It must be ties of karma from the distant past that have destined you to become my disciple at a time like this. Shakyamuni and Many Treasures certainly realized this truth. The sutra's statement, "Those persons who had heard the Law dwelled here and there in various Buddha lands, constantly re-born in company with their teachers,"¹³ cannot be false in any way.

How admirable that you have asked about the transmission of the ultimate Law of life and death! I have never heard of anyone who has asked such a question. I have answered in complete detail in this letter, so please take it deeply to heart. The important point is to carry out your practice confident that Nam-myoho-enge-kyo alone is the heritage that was transferred from Shakyamuni and Many Treasures to Bodhisattva Superior Practices.

The function of fire is to burn and give light. The function of water is to wash away filth. The winds blow away dust and breathe life into plants, animals, and human beings. The earth produces the grasses and trees, and heaven provides nourishing moisture. The five characters of Myoho-enge-kyo are also like that. They are the cluster of blessings brought by the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, disciples of the Buddha in his true identity. The Lotus Sutra says that Bodhisattva Superior Practices will appear now, in the Latter Day of the Law, to propagate this teaching, but has this happened? Whether or not Bodhisattva Superior Practices has appeared in this world, Nichiren has already made a start in propagating this teaching.

Be resolved to summon forth the great power of faith, and chant Nam-

myoho-enge-kyo with the prayer that your faith will be steadfast and correct at the moment of death. Never seek any other way to inherit the ultimate Law of life and death, and manifest it in your life. Only then will you realize that earthly desires are enlightenment, and that the sufferings of birth and death are nirvana. Even embracing the Lotus Sutra would be useless without the heritage of faith.

I will go into particulars again on another occasion.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren,
the shramana of Japan

The eleventh day of the second month in the ninth year of Bun'ei (1272), cyclical sign *mizunoe-saru*

Reply to the Honorable Sairen-bo



Background

This letter, dated the eleventh day of the second month in 1272, was sent by Nichiren Daishonin to Sairen-bo Nichijo, a former Tendai priest who, for reasons that are unclear, was also living in exile on Sado Island. Details about Sairen-bo are scarce, but it is known that he was originally from Kyoto, and that he had studied at Mount Hiei, the seat of the Tendai school, before his exile. He was also present at the Tsukahara Debate, held in front of Sammai-do, the Daishonin's dwelling at Tsukahara, on the sixteenth and seventeenth days of the first month in 1272. In this debate the Daishonin was the clear victor over Pure Land, True Word, and other priests from Sado and from various provinces of northern Japan. A number of people converted to his teachings at this time, among them Sairen-bo.

Sairen-bo was a highly educated priest to whom the Daishonin sent several important essays, including *The True Aspect of All Phenomena* and *The Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life*. He had a number of unresolved questions about Buddhist theory, and he addressed them one by one to the Daishonin, who in turn answered these questions in written form. The Daishonin praised him, saying, "How admirable that you have asked about the transmission of the ultimate Law of life and death!" In his reply the Daishonin offers a look into the wonder of the Buddha's own enlightenment, as well as the practical means whereby ordinary people may attain the same end.

In the first paragraph, the Daishonin states that Nam-myoho-enge-kyo is the heritage of the ultimate Law of life,

and that the transmission of this Law is made from the Buddha to all living beings. Then he refers to the question of how we can inherit the ultimate Law of life and manifest it within ourselves.

This Law flows in the depths of the lives of those who believe in the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, practice in exact accord with them, and chant the daimoku. The Daishonin declares that there is no distinction whatsoever between Shakyamuni Buddha, the Lotus Sutra, and us, ordinary people.

Viewed from the standpoint of the Daishonin's Buddhism, this can be taken as a declaration that there is absolutely no difference or separation between Nichiren Daishonin as the Buddha of the Latter Day, the Law of Nam-myoho-enge-kyo—or the Go-honzon which embodies that Law—and ourselves, who chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo.

In terms of time, the heritage—the mystic relationship between the Law and the lives of the people—courses eternally through past, present, and

future, unbroken in any lifetime. In terms of space, the Daishonin proclaims that the heritage of the ultimate Law flows within the lives of his disciples and lay supporters who work in perfect unity for the realization of a peaceful world and happiness for all humanity.

Having stated that the ultimate Law is within the lives of human beings, Nichiren Daishonin further explains how to inherit the Law. He emphasizes the importance of the attitude, “now is the last moment . . .,” in order to manifest innate Buddhahood, a state that transcends both life and death.

In discussing the thousand Buddhas and the ten kings of hell, he reveals the continuity of cause and effect spanning past, present, and future. Whatever state of life predominates while one is alive will continue in the next life. Whether one can succeed to the heritage of the Law depends entirely on one's faith. This is why he strictly warns in his conclusion, “Even embracing the Lotus Sutra would be useless without the heritage of faith.”

Notes

1. *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*.

2. *The Essential Doctrines Transmitted within the Tendai Lotus School*.

3. Yin and yang are two universal principles of ancient Chinese philosophy. Yin is the negative, dark, and feminine principle; yang is the positive, bright, and masculine principle. Their interaction was thought to determine the destiny of all things.

4. Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. In the thirteenth century the more distant planets were as yet unknown, and Earth was not known to be among the planets.

5. Lotus Sutra, chap. 28.

6. *Ibid.*, chap. 3.

7. Symbolic figures from popular religious tradition. One Chinese concept

viewed hell as a demonic court of law where the dead were tried for their evil deeds.

8. Gods said to dwell on one's shoulders from the time of birth and to record one's every act. They represent the law of cause and effect at work in one's life.

9. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.

10. The phrase “transcending all differences among themselves” could be rendered literally as “without any thought of self or other, this or that.” This is not a denial of individuality, but rather urges the bridging of the gaps between people that arise from self-centeredness.

11. Lotus Sutra, chap. 23.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, chap. 7.