

Letter from Sado



THIS letter is addressed to Toki. It should also be shown to Saburo Saemon, the lay priest Okuratonotsuji Juro, the lay nun of Sajiki, and my other followers. Send me the names of those killed in the battles at Kyoto and Kamakura. Also, please have those who are coming here bring me the anthology of non-Buddhist texts, volume two of *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*, volume four of *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra* and the commentary on this volume, and the collected official opinion papers and collected imperial edicts.

The most dreadful things in the world are the pain of fire, the flashing of swords, and the shadow of death. Even horses and cattle fear being killed; no wonder human beings are afraid of death. Even a leper clings to life; how much more so a healthy person. The Buddha teaches that even filling the entire major world system with the seven kinds of treasures does not match offering one's little finger to the Buddha and the [Lotus] sutra.¹ The boy Snow Mountains gave his own body, and the ascetic Aspiration for the Law peeled off his own skin [in order to record the Buddha's teachings]. Since nothing is more precious than life itself, one who dedicates one's life to Buddhist practice is certain to attain Buddhahood. If one is prepared to of-

fer one's life, why should one begrudge any other treasure for the sake of Buddhism? On the other hand, if one is loath to part with one's wealth, how can one possibly offer one's life, which is far more valuable?

The way of the world dictates that one should repay a great obligation to another, even at the cost of one's life. Many warriors die for their lords, perhaps many more than one would imagine. A man will die to defend his honor; a woman will die for a man. Fish want to survive; they deplore their pond's shallowness and dig holes in the bottom to hide in, yet tricked by bait, they take the hook. Birds in a tree fear that they are too low and perch in the top branches, yet bewitched by bait, they too are caught in snares. Human beings are equally vulnerable. They give their lives for shallow, worldly matters but rarely for the Buddha's precious teachings. Small wonder they do not attain Buddhahood.

Buddhism should be spread by the method of either shojū or shakubuku, depending on the age. These are analogous to the two worldly ways of the literary and the military. The great sages of old practiced the Buddhist teachings as befitted the times. The boy Snow Mountains and Prince Sattva offered their bodies when urged that by doing so they would hear the teach-

ing in return, and that giving one's life constitutes bodhisattva practice. But should one sacrifice one's life at a time when it is not required? In an age when there is no paper, one should use one's own skin. In an age when there are no writing brushes, one should use one's own bones. In an age when people honor the observers of the precepts and the practitioners of the correct teaching while they denounce those who break or ignore the precepts, one should strictly follow the precepts. In an age when Confucianism or Taoism is used to suppress Shakyamuni's teachings, one should risk one's life to remonstrate with the emperor, as did the Dharma teachers Tao-an and Hui-yüan and the Tripitaka Master Fa-tao. In an age when people confuse Hinayana and Mahayana teachings, provisional and true teachings, or exoteric and esoteric doctrines, as though unable to distinguish gems from tiles and stones or cow's milk from donkey's milk,² one should strictly differentiate between them, following the example of the great teachers T'ien-t'ai and Dengyo.

It is the nature of beasts to threaten the weak and fear the strong. Our contemporary scholars of the various schools are just like them. They despise a wise man without power, but fear evil rulers. They are no more than fawning retainers. Only by defeating a powerful enemy can one prove one's real strength. When an evil ruler in consort with priests of erroneous teachings tries to destroy the correct teaching and do away with a man of wisdom, those with the heart of a lion king are sure to attain Buddhahood. Like Nichiren, for example. I say this not out of arrogance, but because I am deeply committed to the correct teaching. An arrogant person will always be overcome with fear when meeting a strong enemy, as was the haughty asura who shrank in size and hid himself in a lotus blossom in Heat-Free Lake when re-

proached by Shakra. Even a word or a phrase of the correct teaching will enable one to gain the way, if it suits the time and the capacity of the people. But though one studies a thousand sutras and ten thousand treatises, one will not attain Buddhahood if these teachings are unsuitable for the time and the people's capacity.

Twenty-six years have passed since the battle of Hoji,³ and fighting⁴ has already broken out twice, on the eleventh and the seventeenth days of the second month of this year. Neither non-Buddhists nor the enemies of Buddhism can destroy the correct teaching of the Thus Come One, but the Buddha's disciples definitely can. As a sutra says, only worms born of the lion's body feed on the lion.⁵ A person of great fortune will never be ruined by enemies, but may be ruined by those who are close. The current battle is what the Medicine Master Sutra means by "the calamity of revolt within one's own domain." The Benevolent Kings Sutra states, "Once the sages have departed, then the seven disasters are certain to arise." The Golden Light Sutra states, "The thirty-three heavenly gods become furious because the king permits evil to run rampant and fails to subdue it." Although I, Nichiren, am not a sage, I am equal to one, for I uphold the Lotus Sutra exactly as it teaches. Furthermore, since I have long understood the ways of the world, the prophecies I have made in this life have all come true. Therefore, you must never doubt what I have told you concerning future existences.

On the twelfth day of the ninth month of last year, when I was arrested, I called out in a loud voice, "I, Nichiren, am the pillar, sun, moon, mirror, and eyes of the ruling clan of Kanto.⁶ If the country abandons me, the seven disasters will occur without fail." Did not this prophecy come true just 60 days and then 150 days later? And those battles were only the first

signs. What lamenting there will be when the full effect appears!

Ignorant people wonder why Nichiren is persecuted by the rulers if he is truly a wise man. Yet it is all just as I expected. King Ajatashatru tormented his father and mother, for which he was hailed by the six royal ministers. When Devadatta killed an arhat and caused the Buddha to bleed, Kokalika and others were delighted. Nichiren is father and mother to the ruling house and is like a Buddha or an arhat to this age. The sovereign and his subjects who rejoice at my exile are truly the most shameless and pitiable of all. Those slanderous priests who have been bewailing the exposure of their errors may be overjoyed for the moment, but eventually they will suffer no less than myself and my followers. Their joy is like Yasuhira's when he killed his younger brother and Kuro Hogan.⁷ The demon who will destroy the ruling clan has already entered the country. This is the meaning of the passage from the Lotus Sutra that reads, "Evil demons will take possession of others."⁸

The persecutions Nichiren has faced are the result of karma formed in previous lifetimes. The "Never Disparaging" chapter reads, "when his offenses had been wiped out," indicating that Bodhisattva Never Disparaging was vilified and beaten by countless slanderers of the correct teaching because of his past karma. How much more true this is of Nichiren, who in this life was born poor and lowly to a chandala family. In my heart I cherish some faith in the Lotus Sutra, but my body, while outwardly human, is fundamentally that of an animal. It was conceived of the two fluids, one white and one red, of a father and mother who subsisted on fish and fowl. My spirit dwells in this body as the moon is reflected in muddy water, or as gold is wrapped in a filthy bag. Since my heart believes in the Lotus Sutra, I do not fear even

Brahma or Shakra, but my body is still that of an animal. With such disparity between my body and my mind, no wonder the foolish despise me. Without doubt, when compared to my body, my mind shines like the moon or like gold. Who knows what slander I may have committed in the past? I may possess the soul of the monk Superior Intent or the spirit of Mahadeva. Perhaps I am descended from those who contemptuously persecuted Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, or am among those who forgot the seeds of enlightenment sown in their lives.⁹ I may even be related to the five thousand arrogant people,¹⁰ or belong to the third group [who failed to take faith in the Lotus Sutra] in the days of the Buddha Great Universal Wisdom Excellence.¹¹ It is impossible to fathom one's karma.

Iron, when heated in the flames and pounded, becomes a fine sword. Worthies and sages are tested by abuse. My present exile is not because of any secular crime. It is solely so that I may expiate in this lifetime my past grave offenses and be freed in the next from the three evil paths.

The Parinirvana Sutra states: "Those who enter the monastic order, don clerical garments, and make a show of studying my teachings will exist in ages to come. Being lazy and remiss, they will slander the correct and equal sutras. You should be aware that all these people are followers of the non-Buddhist doctrines of today." Those who read this passage should reflect deeply on their own practice. The Buddha is saying that those of our contemporary priests who wear clerical garments, but are idle and negligent, were disciples of the six non-Buddhist teachers in his day.

The followers of Honen, who call themselves the Nembutsu school, not only turn people away from the Lotus Sutra, telling them to "discard, close, ignore, and abandon"¹² it, but also ad-

vocate chanting only the name of the Buddha Amida, a Buddha described in the provisional teachings. The followers of Dainichi, known as the Zen school, claim that the Buddha's true teachings have been transmitted apart from the sutras. They ridicule the Lotus Sutra as nothing more than a finger pointing at the moon or a meaningless string of words. Those priests must both have been followers of the six non-Buddhist teachers, who only now have entered the stream of Buddhism.

According to the Nirvana Sutra, the Buddha emitted a radiant light that illuminated the 136 hells underground and revealed that not a single offender remained there. This was because they had all achieved Buddhahood through the "Life Span" chapter of the Lotus Sutra. What a pity, however, that the icchantikas, or persons of incorrigible disbelief, who had slandered the correct teaching, were found to have been detained there by the wardens of hell. They proliferated until they became the people of Japan today.

Since Nichiren himself committed slander in the past, he became a Nembutsu priest in this lifetime, and for several years he also laughed at those who practiced the Lotus Sutra, saying that "not a single person has ever attained Buddhahood"¹³ through that sutra, or that "not even one person in a thousand"¹⁴ can be saved by it. Awakening from my intoxicated state of slander, I felt like a drunken son who, on becoming sober, laments at having delighted in striking his parents. He regrets it bitterly, but to no avail. His offense is extremely difficult to erase. Even more so are the past slanders of the correct teaching that stain the depths of one's heart. A sutra states that both the crow's blackness and the heron's whiteness are actually the deep stains of their past karma.¹⁵ The non-Buddhists failed to recognize this and claimed it was the work of nature.

Today, when I expose people's slanders in an effort to save them, they deny it with every excuse possible and argue back with Honen's words about barring the gates to the Lotus Sutra. From Nembutsu believers this is hardly surprising, but even priests of the Tendai and True Word schools actively support them.

On the sixteenth and seventeenth days of the first month of this year, hundreds of priests and lay believers from the Nembutsu and other schools here in the province of Sado came to debate with me. A leader of the Nembutsu school, Insho-bo, said: "The Honorable Honen did not instruct us to abandon the Lotus Sutra. He simply wrote that all people should chant the Nembutsu, and that its great blessings assure their rebirth in the Pure Land. Even the priests of Mount Hiei and Onjo-ji temple who have been exiled to this island praise him, saying how excellent his teaching is. How dare you try to refute it?" The local priests are even more ignorant than the Nembutsu priests in Kamakura. They are absolutely pitiful.

How terrible are the slanders Nichiren has committed in his past and present existences! Since you have been born into this evil country and become the disciples of such a man, there is no telling what will happen to you. The Parinirvana Sutra states: "Good man, because people committed countless offenses and accumulated much evil karma in the past, they must expect to suffer retribution for everything they have done. They may be despised, cursed with an ugly appearance, be poorly clad and poorly fed, seek wealth in vain, be born to an impoverished and lowly family or one with erroneous views, or be persecuted by their sovereign." It continues: "They may be subjected to various other sufferings and retributions. It is due to the blessings obtained by protecting the Law

that they can diminish in this lifetime their suffering and retribution.” Were it not for Nichiren, these passages from the sutra would virtually make the Buddha a liar. The sutra says, first, “They may be despised”; second, “They may be cursed with an ugly appearance”; third, “They may be poorly clad”; fourth, “They may be poorly fed”; fifth, “They may seek wealth in vain”; sixth, “They may be born to an impoverished and lowly family”; seventh, “They may be born to a family with erroneous views”; and eighth, “They may be persecuted by their sovereign.” These eight phrases apply only to me, Nichiren.

One who climbs a high mountain must eventually descend. One who slights another will in turn be despised. One who deprecates those of handsome appearance will be born ugly. One who robs another of food and clothing is sure to fall into the world of hungry spirits. One who mocks a person who observes the precepts and is worthy of respect will be born to an impoverished and lowly family. One who slanders a family that embraces the correct teaching will be born to a family that holds erroneous views. One who laughs at those who cherish the precepts faithfully will be born a commoner and meet with persecution from one’s sovereign. This is the general law of cause and effect.

My sufferings, however, are not ascribable to this causal law. In the past I despised the votaries of the Lotus Sutra. I also ridiculed the sutra itself, sometimes with exaggerated praise and other times with contempt—that sutra as magnificent as two moons shining side by side, two stars conjoined, one Mount Hua¹⁶ placed atop another, or two jewels combined. This is why I have experienced the aforementioned eight kinds of sufferings. Usually these sufferings appear one at a time, on into the boundless future, but Nichiren has

denounced the enemies of the Lotus Sutra so severely that all eight have descended at once. This is like the case of a peasant heavily in debt to the steward of his village and to other authorities. As long as he remains in his village or district, rather than mercilessly hounding him, they are likely to defer his debts from one year to the next. But when he tries to leave, they rush over and demand that he repay everything at once. This is what the sutra means when it states, “It is due to the blessings obtained by protecting the Law.”

The Lotus Sutra says: “There will be many ignorant people who will curse and speak ill of us and will attack us with swords and staves, with rocks and tiles . . . they will address the rulers, high ministers, Brahmins, and householders, [as well as the other monks, slandering and speaking evil of us] . . . again and again we will be banished.”¹⁷ If the offenders are not tormented by the wardens of hell, they will never be able to [pay for their offenses and] escape from hell. Were it not for the rulers and ministers who now persecute me, I would be unable to expiate my past sins of slandering the correct teaching.

Nichiren is like Bodhisattva Never Disparaging of old, and the people of this day are like the four categories of Buddhists who disparaged and cursed him. Though the people are different, the cause is the same. Though different people kill their parents, they all fall into the same hell of incessant suffering. Since Nichiren is making the same cause as Never Disparaging, how could it be that he would not become a Buddha equal to Shakyamuni? Moreover, those who now slander him are like Bhadrápala¹⁸ and the others [who cursed Never Disparaging]. They will be tortured in the Avichi hell for a thousand kalpas. I therefore pity them deeply and wonder what can be done

for them. Those who belittled and cursed Never Disparaging acted that way at first, but later they took faith in his teachings and willingly became his followers. The greater part of the fault of their slander was thus expiated, but even the small part that remained caused them to suffer as terribly as one who had killed one's parents a thousand times. The people of this age refuse to repent at all; therefore, as the "Simile and Parable" chapter states, they must suffer in hell for a countless number of kalpas; they may even suffer there for a duration of major world system dust particle kalpas or of numberless major world system dust particle kalpas.

Aside from these people, there are also those who appeared to believe in me, but began doubting when they saw me persecuted. They not only have forsaken the Lotus Sutra, but also actually think themselves wise enough to instruct me. The pitiful thing is that these perverse people must suffer in the Avichi hell even longer than the Nembutsu believers.

An asura contended that the Buddha taught only eighteen elements,¹⁹ but that he himself expounded nineteen. The non-Buddhist teachers claimed that the Buddha offered only one way to enlightenment, but that they had ninety-five.²⁰ In the same way, the renegade disciples say, "Though the priest Nichiren is our teacher, he is too forceful. We will spread the Lotus Sutra in a more peaceful way." In so asserting, they

are being as ridiculous as fireflies laughing at the sun and moon, an anthill belittling Mount Hua, wells and brooks despising the river and the ocean, or a magpie mocking a phoenix. Nam-myoho-rence-kyo.

Nichiren

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

To Nichiren's disciples and lay supporters

There is very little writing paper here in the province of Sado, and to write to you individually would take too long. Nevertheless, if even one person fails to hear from me, it will cause resentment. Therefore, I want people with seeking minds to meet and read this letter together for encouragement. When great trouble occurs in the world, minor troubles become insignificant. I do not know how accurate the reports reaching me are, but there must surely be intense grieving over those killed in the recent battles. What has become of the lay priests Izawa and Sakabe? Send me news of Kawanobe, Yamashiro, Tokugyo-ji,²¹ and the others. Also, please be kind enough to send me *The Essentials of Government in the Chen-kuan Era*,²² the collection of tales from the non-Buddhist classics, and the record of the teachings transmitted within the eight schools. Without these, I cannot even write letters.



Background

This letter was written on the twentieth day of the third month, 1272, some five months after Nichiren Daishonin had arrived on the island of Sado to begin his exile there. He addressed it to

Toki Jonin, a samurai serving as a leading retainer to Lord Chiba, the constable of Shimoso Province, to Saburo Saemon (Shijo Kingo) in Kamakura, and to other staunch followers.

Nichiren Daishonin had been banished on the tenth day of the tenth month, 1271. Charges of treason had been brought against him by Ryokan, the chief priest of Gokuraku-ji temple in Kamakura, and by Hei no Saemon, deputy chief of the Office of Military and Police Affairs. Hei no Saemon was resolved to execute the Daishonin at Tatsunokuchi before he was to be delivered to the custody of Homma Shigetsura, the deputy constable of Sado. The attempt at execution was unsuccessful, however, and after a delay of almost a month Homma's warriors escorted the Daishonin to the coast of the Sea of Japan. After a delay there caused by bad weather, the Daishonin finally arrived on Sado on the twenty-eighth day of the tenth month.

Nichiren Daishonin was housed at first in a dilapidated structure known as Sammai-do, where he lived exposed to the wind and snow that blew in through gaps in the roof and walls. After five months he was able to move to more comfortable quarters at Ichinosawa. The Daishonin engaged in debates with Pure Land and other priests and actively propagated his own teachings. While on Sado he wrote two major treatises, *The Opening of the Eyes* and *The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind*. In the second month, 1274, the Daishonin was pardoned and returned to Kamakura on the twenty-sixth day of the third month.

In this writing the Daishonin first states that the only way to attain Bud-

dhahood is to be willing to offer one's life, one's most precious possession, to Buddhism. Next, he says that the method of propagation known as shakubuku is appropriate to this age, and that one can attain Buddhahood only by dedicating oneself to it. He then declares that he is the "pillar, sun, moon, mirror, and eyes" of and "father and mother" to the country; these are symbolic references to the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law, who is perfectly endowed with the three virtues of parent, teacher, and sovereign. He also mentions his earlier prophecies in *On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land* concerning political upheaval and violent feuds within the country.

Lastly, he gives an elaborate explanation of karma or destiny, stating that his present difficulties arise from the fact that he slandered the Lotus Sutra in a past existence. Using himself as an example, he elucidates to his disciples the kind of spirit and practice by which they can alter their karma. He adds that persons who try to propagate the correct teaching of Buddhism vigorously will invariably face opposition, and that such opposition in reality presents an opportunity for them to change their karma. Those who have given up their faith and instead criticize are admonished that their actions bear the heaviest consequences. He compares their lack of vision to fireflies who laugh at the sun.

Notes

1. Based on a passage in chapter 23 of the Lotus Sutra.

2. Cow's milk indicates the Lotus Sutra, while donkey's milk, thought to be poisonous, represents all the other sutras.

3. The battle waged in 1247 between the Hojo clan and its kin Miura family for control of the regency. The Hojo clan was victorious. In 1272, some twenty-six years

later, the Kamakura government was again plagued by internal strife.

4. Fighting here refers to the rebellions hatched by Hojo Tokisuke, an influential commissioner in Kyoto, to overthrow the regent Hojo Tokimune, his half brother. Tokisuke's coconspirators in Kamakura were killed by government forces on the eleventh day of the second month, while

Tokisuke himself was attacked and killed in Kyoto on the fifteenth. The “seventeenth” either was based on inaccurate information or else was a mistake that entered when the original document was copied.

5. Lotus-like Face Sutra.

6. Kanto refers to the Kamakura government.

7. Yasuhira refers to Fujiwara Yasuhira (1155–1189), the son of Fujiwara Hidehira, lord of the province of Mutsu in northeastern Japan. Yasuhira killed his brother and seized power for himself. Minamoto no Yoritomo, the Kamakura shogun, ordered him to kill Kuro Hogan Yoshitsune, Yoritomo’s brother, which he did to prove his loyalty. Later, however, Yoritomo had him executed to consolidate his own power in the northern part of Japan.

8. Lotus Sutra, chap. 13.

9. “Those who forgot the seeds of enlightenment” are individuals who, because of the slanders they have committed, do not remember that they received the seeds of Buddhahood from Shakyamuni Buddha numberless major world system dust particle kalpas ago.

10. According to the “Expedient Means” chapter of the Lotus Sutra, five thousand people—monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen—left the assembly as Shakyamuni began to preach about “the replacement of the three vehicles with the one vehicle,” because they supposed they had attained what they had not attained.

11. This is described in the “Parable of the Phantom City” chapter of the Lotus Sutra. Major world system dust particle kalpas ago, the Buddha Great Universal Wisdom Excellence preached the Lotus Sutra to his sixteen sons. These sons then preached the sutra to the people, some of whom took faith in it and attained enlightenment. The third group comprises those who heard the Lotus Sutra at that time, but did not take faith in it. And even though

they were reborn in Shakyamuni’s lifetime, they still were unable to believe in the Lotus Sutra.

12. Honen does not use these words in this particular form, however. Nichiren Daishonin took these words from *The Nembutsu Chosen above All* and put them together as a set.

13. Tao-ch’o’s *Collected Essays on the World of Peace and Delight*.

14. Shan-tao’s *Praising Rebirth in the Pure Land*.

15. Presumably a rephrasing of a passage in the Shurangama Sutra (Sutra of the Resolute Meditation).

16. One of the five sacred mountains in China.

17. Lotus Sutra, chap. 13. This chapter actually refers only to “swords and staves.” “Rocks and tiles” is an interpolation from the “Never Disparaging” chapter.

18. Bhadrakala was the leader of the five hundred bodhisattvas involved in the persecution of Never Disparaging.

19. Eighteen elements: The comprehensive concept of the three interrelated categories: the six sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind), the six objects they perceive, and the six consciousnesses or the sense organs’ functions of perceiving the objects.

20. Based on a passage in *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*. The “ninety-five” ways may be ascribable to the fact that there were ninety-five non-Buddhist schools during Shakyamuni’s day.

21. Kawanobe, Yamashiro, and Tokugyo-ji were followers of the Daishonin, said to have been imprisoned in a dungeon following the Tatsunokuchi Persecution.

22. A work written by Wu Ching during the T’ang dynasty. The work discusses the state of political affairs between the emperor and his subjects during the Chenkuan era (627–649).