

Reply to Sairen-bo



TAKE great care when you come to see me after dark. I will explain to you in detail the teachings regarding the benefits to be gained by one ordained to the highest stage of Buddhist practice.¹

I have carefully noted the contents of your letter. I have also received safely the various articles that came from the capital [Kyoto]. When I was living in Kamakura, such articles were a daily sight, but since having been exiled to this island, I have yet to encounter them. To come upon articles such as these on this tiny faraway island is truly most welcome.

In your letter you mention that you became a disciple of mine and pledged to follow me at the beginning of the second month, and that from now on, though you may not measure up to others, you would be most pleased and honored if I would continue to count you among my disciples.

The sutra says, "Those persons who had heard the Law dwelled here and there in various Buddha lands, constantly reborn in company with their teachers."² It also says, "If one stays close to the teachers of the Law, one will speedily gain the bodhisattva way. By following and learning from these teachers one will see Buddhas as numerous as Ganges sands."³

A commentary states, "Originally

one followed this Buddha and for the first time conceived the desire to seek the way. And by following this Buddha again, one will reach the stage where there is no retrogression."⁴ Another commentary states, "In the beginning one followed this Buddha or bodhisattva and formed a bond with him, and so it will be through this Buddha or bodhisattva that one will attain one's goal."⁵

When I consider these passages of the sutra and the commentaries, I wonder if you and I have not been pledged to each other as teacher and disciple from countless kalpas in the past. You and I have been born together in this defiled age of the Latter Day of the Law, in the country of Japan in the southern continent of Jambudvīpa, and with the utmost reverence we chant with our mouths *Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō*, the ultimate reason for which the Buddhas appear in the world; we believe in it in our hearts, embrace it with our bodies, and delight in it with our hands. Has all of this not come about solely because of some bond of karma we share from the past?

When I look at the situation in Japan, I find that the devil king of the sixth heaven has entered into the bodies of wise persons, transforming correct teachers into erroneous teachers, and good teachers into bad teachers.

This is what the sutra means when it says, "Evil demons will take possession of others."⁶

Although I, Nichiren, am not a man of wisdom, the devil king of the sixth heaven has attempted to take possession of my body. But I have for some time been taking such great care that he now no longer comes near me. Therefore, because the power of the heavenly devil is ineffectual against me, he instead possesses the ruler and his high officials, or foolish priests such as Ryokan, and causes them to hate me.

Be that as it may, one should understand that, at present, when it comes to teachers, there is a difference between correct teachers and erroneous teachers, between good teachers and bad teachers. One should shun those who are erroneous or evil, and associate with those who are correct and good. Even if their virtue is known throughout the country and their wisdom is as bright as the sun and moon, one should recognize that teachers who slander the Lotus Sutra are evil teachers and erroneous teachers, and refrain from approaching them. A sutra warns us on this point, "If there are slanderers of the Law, one should not dwell with them. If one draws near them and dwells with them, one will be bound for the Avichi hell."⁷

No matter how honest and upright you may be, or how you may strive to be known as a worthy person in the secular or the religious world, if you associate with evil persons, then as a natural result you will find that in two or three instances out of ten you are following their teachings, and in the end you, too, will become an evil person. Thus the commentary says, "Though one may not be evil to begin with, if one associates with and is friendly with evil persons, one is bound in time to become an evil person oneself, and one's evil reputation will spread throughout the world."⁸

In the end, what we mean by erroneous and evil teachers are those priests in the world today who slander the Lotus Sutra. The Nirvana Sutra says: "Bodhisattvas, have no fear of mad elephants. What you should fear are evil friends! . . . 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." The Lotus Sutra says, "In that evil age there will be monks with perverse wisdom and hearts that are fawning and crooked."⁹

As I have pointed out so many times in the past, when teachers such as Shan-wu-wei, Chin-kang-chih, Bodhidharma, Hui-k'o, Shan-tao, Honen, Kobo of To-ji, Chisho of Onjo-ji, Jikaku of Mount Hiei, or Ryokan of Kanto read the golden words, "Honestly discarding expedient means, [I will preach only the unsurpassed way],"¹⁰ they take them to mean, "Honestly discarding the true teachings, I will preach only the expedient teachings." When they read the passage that says, "Among the sutras, it [the Lotus Sutra] holds the highest place,"¹¹ they take it to mean, "Among the sutras, it holds the lowest place." And when they read, "[Among those sutras] the Lotus is the foremost,"¹² they take it to mean, "The Lotus holds second place," or "holds third place." That is why I describe these various priests as misleading and evil teachers.

Those that I call correct and good teachers are persons who take Shakyamuni Buddha's golden words to mean just what they say, namely, that the other sutras represent expedient means and the Lotus Sutra represents the truth.

In this connection, you should consult the "Entering the Dharma Realm" chapter, the seventy-seventh volume of the Flower Garland Sutra.¹³ The Lotus Sutra states, "A good friend is the great cause and condition by which one is guided and led, and which enables one

to see the Buddha and to conceive the desire for supreme perfect enlightenment.”¹⁴

As the Buddha tells us, we should regard as correct teachers and good teachers those who honestly discard the doctrines of the four flavors and three teachings, the Hinayana and provisional Mahayana sutras that were expounded as expedient means, as well as the Nembutsu, True Word, Zen, and Precepts schools and the sutras upon which they rely, and expound Myohorenge-kyo, “the one great reason for which the Buddhas appear in the world.”¹⁵

As for myself, I, Nichiren, having been born in Japan in the first five hundred years of the Latter Day of the Law, have encountered the three powerful enemies and met with various types of calamity and trouble, just as the Thus Come One predicted would happen. But, without any thought for my person or my life, I chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo. I ask you to consider with the utmost care whether I deserve to be called a correct teacher or an erroneous teacher.

Each of the proponents of the various schools I have mentioned above declares that he beyond all others has grasped the meaning of and is practicing the Lotus Sutra. But none of them have been exiled to the province of Izu as I was in the Kocho era, or exiled to the island of Sado as I was in the Bun’ei era, or been led to the place of decapitation at Tatsunokuchi or faced the countless other difficulties that I have. If the sutra passages [that predict such difficulties] are true, then you should realize that I am the correct teacher, the good teacher, and that the scholars of the other schools are all erroneous teachers and evil teachers.

In addition to these, there are a great many other passages in the sutras and treatises that make clear the distinction between these two types of teachers,

the good and the bad. But I am sure you are already familiar with them, so I will not go into them here.

How wondrous that in your letter you say that from now on you will reject the erroneous teachers of our time and will rely entirely upon me as the correct teacher! When the Thus Come One Shakyamuni, our original teacher, appeared in the world in order to expound the Lotus Sutra, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas of the other worlds, like shadows and echoes, came forth and assisted him in his efforts to spread the teachings. Now it seems that they have appeared here in Japan as envoys of Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and the Buddhas of the ten directions to help me in my efforts to spread the teachings!

The sutra says: “I will send persons conjured up by magic to other lands to gather together assemblies to listen to the Law. And I will also send [monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen] conjured up by magic [to listen to the preaching of the Law. These persons conjured up by magic will listen to the Law, believe and accept it], and abide by it without violation.”¹⁶ The “monks” who are spoken of in this passage refer to you. Therefore, when the sutra speaks of persons who “listen to the Law, believe and accept it, and abide by it without violation,” you need look no further than yourself. How can there be any doubt about it?

Although the sutra speaks of those who, having heard the Law, “dwelled here and there in various Buddha lands, constantly reborn in company with their teachers,” there are persons like the three groups of voice-hearers who, after receiving the seeds of Buddhahood, reject the Mahayana, select the Hinayana, and sink into the five paths or the six paths for a succession of rebirths, but when the time to achieve Buddhahood arrives, they are able to obtain emancipation, one after

another. How gratifying to think that you have now cast aside the erroneous doctrines and erroneous teachers of the Nembutsu, True Word, and other schools, and become a disciple of Nichiren!

In any case, like me, you should condemn the slander of the Law committed by the followers of the other schools and cause them to reject the erroneous and embrace the correct. Then, when you arrive in the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light where the three kinds of Buddhas¹⁷ are seated, and appear before the Buddhas Shakyamuni and Many Treasures, you will ask, "Were Nichiren and I bound by a promise to be teacher and disciple from the beginningless past, or were we not? Was I sent as an envoy of Shakyamuni Buddha to assist him in his efforts to spread the teachings?" And when the Buddhas reply, "Just so!" then you, too, will understand in your own mind why these things happened. Therefore, you must by all means be diligent! You must be diligent!

As a matter of course, I began giving you instruction in the important doctrines around the second month. And as a result, on the eighth day of the fourth month, after midnight in the hour of the tiger (3:00–5:00 A.M.), I performed for you the ceremony for ordination in the precept¹⁸ of the perfect teaching of the Mystic Law.

How could a person who has undergone this ordination fail to become a Buddha of perfect enlightenment in his present existence? And if in this life you have attained the level of perfect enlightenment, then in your next life, how could you have any reason to regress to the stage of near-perfect enlightenment and other lower stages of practice? In view of our promise from the beginningless past and the principle that one will be constantly reborn with one's teacher, if I, Nichiren, attain Buddhahood in my present lifetime, then

how could it be possible for you to become separated from me and fall into the evil paths?

The prophecies of the Thus Come One recorded in the scripture, when viewed in the light of the Buddha's true intentions, never contain the slightest falsehood with regard to either secular or religious matters. Now, in the Lotus Sutra it is stated, "After I have passed into extinction, [one] should accept and uphold this sutra. Such a person assuredly and without doubt will attain the Buddha way."¹⁹ It also says, "This way one will quickly attain the unsurpassed Buddha way."²⁰ If these passages of prophecy should be meaningless, and if the prediction that we will attain Buddhahood should be a lie, then the tongues of all the Buddhas will break apart, the tower of Many Treasures Buddha will crumble and fall, the place upon which the two Buddhas [Shakyamuni and Many Treasures] are seated side by side will be changed into a bed of burning iron in the hell of incessant suffering, and the three lands of Transition, Actual Reward, and Eternally Tranquil Light will be transformed into the three evil paths of hell, hungry spirits, and animals. But how could such a thing ever be possible?

Ah, how assuring! How assuring! If we continue to think in this way, then, though we may be exiles, we have cause to be joyful in both body and mind!

So day and night I ponder the important doctrines, and hour by hour, moment by moment, I savor the principle that allows us to attain Buddhahood. And because I pass the time in this fashion, though months and years go by, it does not seem long at all, and the hours that have elapsed do not seem like many. It is similar to the case described in the sutra when the two Buddhas Shakyamuni and Many Treasures, seated side by side in the treasure tower, nodded in approval over the wonderful principles of the Lotus Su-

tra, and although fifty small kalpas had elapsed, because of the supernatural powers of the Buddha, it seemed to the great crowd assembled there like no more than half a day.²¹

Among all the persons since the beginning of our present kalpa who have incurred the wrath of their parents or their rulers and have been exiled to distant islands, there can be none who overflow with joy as we do. Therefore, wherever we dwell and practice the single vehicle, that place will be the Capital of Eternally Tranquil Light. And, without having to take a step, those who are our disciples and lay supporters can view Eagle Peak in India and day and night will go to and from the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light that has existed for all time. What a truly inexpressible joy it is!

So delightful is the thought that I will now make a promise to you. If you should be released quickly from exile and return to the capital, although the lord of Kamakura²² may continue to refuse pardon to Nichiren, I will call upon the heavenly deities, and when I have returned to Kamakura, I will write to you in Kyoto. If I should be pardoned first and return to Kamakura, I will call upon the heavenly gods to make certain that you are able to return home to the capital.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The thirteenth day of the fourth
month

Reply to Sairen-bo



Background

This letter was written to Sairen-bo Nichijō in the fourth month of the ninth year of Bun'ei (1272) at Ichinosawa on Sado Island. Sairen-bo, a former Tendai priest, was also living in exile on Sado. From the letters sent to him by Nichiren Daishonin, it appears that Sairen-bo was well versed in Buddhist teachings. The Daishonin, on receiving the government's pardon, left Sado and moved to Minobu. Somewhat later Sairen-bo was also pardoned, whereupon he returned to his native Kyoto. He received a number of important writings from the Daishonin, including *The Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life* and *The True Aspect of All Phenomena*.

In this letter, the Daishonin expresses his heartfelt gratitude for the various articles from Kyoto that Sairen-bo had sent to him as offerings. For an exile such as Sairen-bo, these articles must

have been exceedingly precious.

The Daishonin also refers to a letter that Sairen-bo had sent him. In his letter Sairen-bo explained that he had pledged near the beginning of the second month to follow the Daishonin, and he expressed his desire to be considered one of the Daishonin's disciples.

With regard to Sairen-bo's recent pledge to become his disciple, the Daishonin quotes from the Lotus Sutra and its commentaries to illustrate the profound relationship between teacher and disciple. He then states that one should discard evil teachers and follow good ones. He reveals that he himself is the true and correct teacher for the Latter Day of the Law and declares that Sairen-bo was born in order to aid him in his efforts, thereby encouraging his disciple to exert himself in Buddhist practice.

The Daishonin reveals the great benefits to be gained by observing the precept of the perfect teaching—in other words, faith in the Mystic Law. And he tells Sairen-bo that, although they may both be exiles, in the future

they are sure to attain Buddhahood and that, therefore, he feels great satisfaction and joy. In conclusion, the Daishonin encourages Sairen-bo by suggesting that they are both likely to be pardoned soon.

Notes

1. The highest stage of Buddhist practice refers to the stage of perfect enlightenment, the highest of the fifty-two stages of bodhisattva practice.

2. Lotus Sutra, chap. 7.

3. *Ibid.*, chap. 10.

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

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

6. Lotus Sutra, chap. 13.

7. Ten Kinds of Wheels Sutra.

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

9. Lotus Sutra, chap. 13.

10. *Ibid.*, chap. 2.

11. *Ibid.*, chap. 14.

12. *Ibid.*, chap. 10.

13. The "Entering the Dharma Realm" chapter consists of the sixtieth volume through the eightieth, and last, volume of the eighty-volume Flower Garland Sutra. This chapter relates the story of the boy Good Treasures, who visits a total of fifty-three teachers in search of the Law. In the seventy-seventh volume, when he meets

the boy Life of Virtue and the girl Possessor of Virtue, he learns about the importance of correct and good teachers and about the benefits to be gained by following them.

14. Lotus Sutra, chap. 27.

15. *Ibid.*, chap. 2.

16. *Ibid.*, chap. 10. The entire passage is quoted in translation here for clarity, although only a portion appears in the Japanese original.

17. The three kinds of Buddhas refer to Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and the Buddhas of the ten directions.

18. The precept refers here to the rule of conduct that one should observe to attain Buddhahood instantly. It means, simply, to embrace the Mystic Law.

19. Lotus Sutra, chap. 21.

20. *Ibid.*, chap. 11.

21. This scene is described in chapter 15 of the Lotus Sutra.

22. The lord of Kamakura is another name for Hojo Tokimune (1251–1284), the eighth regent of the Kamakura government.