

## Earthly Desires Are Enlightenment



I DEEPLY appreciate your visit here and your constant concern over the numerous persecutions that have befallen me. I do not regret meeting with such great persecutions as the votary of the Lotus Sutra. However many times I were to repeat the cycle of birth and death, no life could be as fortunate as this. [If not for these troubles,] I might have remained in the three or four evil paths. But now, to my great joy, I am sure to sever the cycle of the sufferings of birth and death, and attain the fruit of Buddhahood.

Even for spreading the teaching of the theoretical “three thousand realms in a single moment of life” from the first half of the Lotus Sutra, T’ien-t’ai and Dengyo met with hatred and jealousy. In Japan it was transmitted from Dengyo to Gishin, Encho, Jikaku, and others, and spread. The eighteenth chief priest of the Tendai school was the Great Teacher Jie, and he had many disciples. Among them there were four named Danna, Eshin, Soga, and Zen’yu. The teaching also was divided into two: the Administrator of Priests Danna transmitted the doctrinal studies, while the Supervisor of Priests Eshin studied the meditative practices. Thus the doctrinal studies and meditative practices are like the sun and moon; doctrinal studies are shallow, while meditative practices are deep. Thus the teaching ex-

pounded by Danna is broad but shallow, while the teaching of Eshin is limited but deep.

Though the teaching I am now propagating seems limited, it is extremely profound. That is because it goes deeper than the teaching expounded by T’ien-t’ai, Dengyo, and others. It is the three important matters<sup>1</sup> in the “Life Span” chapter of the essential teaching. Practicing only the seven characters of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo seems limited, but since they are the master of all the Buddhas of the three existences, the teacher of all the bodhisattvas in the ten directions, and the guide that enables all living beings to attain the Buddha way, it is profound.

The sutra states, “The wisdom of the Buddhas is infinitely profound and immeasurable.”<sup>2</sup> It refers to “the Buddhas” here in the sense of all Buddhas throughout the ten directions in the three existences, from the Thus Come One Mahavairochana of the True Word school and Amida of the Pure Land school to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas of all schools and all sutras, all Buddhas of the past, future, and present, and the present Thus Come One Shakyamuni. And the sutra speaks of the wisdom of all those Buddhas.

What is meant by this “wisdom”? It is the entity of the true aspect of

all phenomena, and of the ten factors of life that lead all beings to Buddhahood. What then is that entity? It is Nam-myoho-enge-kyo. A commentary states that the profound principle of the true aspect is the originally inherent Myoho-enge-kyo.<sup>3</sup> We learn that that true aspect of all phenomena is also the two Buddhas Shakyamuni and Many Treasures [seated together in the treasure tower]. “All phenomena” corresponds to Many Treasures, and “the true aspect” corresponds to Shakyamuni. These are also the two elements of reality and wisdom. Many Treasures is reality; Shakyamuni is wisdom. It is the enlightenment that reality and wisdom are two, and yet they are not two.

These are teachings of prime importance. These are also what is called “earthly desires are enlightenment,” and “the sufferings of birth and death are nirvana.” Chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo during the physical union of man and woman is indeed what is called “earthly desires are enlightenment,” and “the sufferings of birth and death are nirvana.” “The sufferings of birth and death are nirvana” exists only in realizing that the entity of life throughout its cycle of birth and death is neither born nor destroyed. The Universal Worthy Sutra states, “Without either cutting off earthly desires or separating themselves from the five desires, they can purify all their senses and wipe away all their offenses.” *Great Concentration and Insight* says, “The ignorance and dust of desires are enlightenment, and the sufferings of birth and death are nirvana.” The “Life Span” chapter of the Lotus Sutra says, “At all times I think to myself: How can I cause living beings to gain entry into the unsurpassed way and quickly acquire the body of a Buddha?” The “Expedient Means” chapter says, “The characteristics of the world are constantly abiding.” Surely such statements refer to these principles. Thus what is called the

entity is none other than Nam-myoho-enge-kyo.

It was such an august and precious Lotus Sutra that in past existences I put under my knees, despised, scowled upon in disgust, and failed to believe in. In one way or another, I maliciously ridiculed those who, studying the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, taught them to even one person, and carried on the life of the Law. In addition, I did everything I could to hinder people from embracing the sutra by asserting that they should set it aside for a while because, though it might be suitable for practice in their next lifetime, it would be too difficult to practice in this one. Slandorous acts such as these have brought on the many severe persecutions I have suffered in my lifetime. Because I once disparaged the Lotus Sutra, the highest of all sutras, I am now looked down on, and my words go unheeded. The “Simile and Parable” chapter states that other people will neither concern themselves with one nor have sympathy for one, even though one sincerely tries to be friendly with them.

Nevertheless, you became a votary of the Lotus Sutra, and as a result, you suffered severe persecutions, and you came to my assistance. In the “Teacher of the Law” chapter, the Buddha states that he will magically conjure and send the four kinds of believers—monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen [—for the sake of the teachers of the Law]. If the “laymen” mentioned here does not mean you, who does it refer to? You have not only heard the Law, but have taken faith in it and since then have followed it without turning aside. How wondrous! How extraordinary! If that is the case, then can there be any doubt that I am the teacher of the Law of the Lotus Sutra? Perhaps I also resemble “the envoy of the Thus Come One,” for I am carrying out “the Thus Come One’s work.”<sup>4</sup> I have nearly spread the

five characters of the daimoku that were entrusted to Bodhisattva Superior Practices when the two Buddhas were seated together within the treasure tower. Does this not mean that I am an envoy of Bodhisattva Superior Practices? Moreover, following me, you, as a votary of the Lotus Sutra, have told others of this Law. What else could this be but the transmission of the Law?

Carry through with your faith in the Lotus Sutra. You cannot strike fire from flint if you stop halfway. Bring forth the great power of faith, and be spoken of by all the people of Kamakura, both high and low, or by all the people of Japan, as “Shijo Kingo, Shijo Kingo of the Lotus school!”<sup>5</sup> Even a bad reputation will spread far and wide. A good reputation will spread even far-

ther, particularly if it is a reputation for devotion to the Lotus Sutra.

Explain all this to your wife too, and work together like the sun and moon, a pair of eyes, or the two wings of a bird. With the sun and moon, could there be a path of darkness? With a pair of eyes, no doubt you will see the faces of Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and the Buddhas of the ten directions. With a pair of wings, you will surely fly in an instant to the treasure land of Tranquil Light. I will write in more detail on another occasion.

With my deep respect,  
Nichiren

The second day of the fifth month

Reply to Shijo Kingo



## Background

In the fourth month of the ninth year of Bun’ei (1272), Shijo Kingo traveled from Kamakura to Sado Island to visit Nichiren Daishonin. Kingo was a samurai who served the Ema family, a branch of the ruling Hojo clan. The journey to Sado was a long, arduous one, involving a boat trip across the Sea of Japan, and required that he absent himself from his duties in Kamakura for more than a month.

In the fifth month of the same year, soon after Shijo Kingo returned to Kamakura, Nichiren Daishonin sent him this letter. It was written in gratitude for the samurai’s visit.

In the letter, the Daishonin explains the power of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo in terms of such profound Buddhist principles as the fusion of reality and wisdom, and earthly desires are enlightenment. Although Hinayana Buddhism teaches that earthly desires must be eliminated to attain enlightenment,

Mahayana, and particularly the Lotus Sutra, teaches that earthly desires are one with and inseparable from enlightenment. The reason is that both are the workings, or expression, of life itself, and thus are the same in their source.

Nichiren Daishonin teaches that, when one bases one’s life on Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, earthly desires work naturally for one’s own and others’ happiness. The great power of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, which is inherently positive and creative, directs the great energy of one’s earthly desires toward happiness and value for all. Thus, when one chants the daimoku, “earthly desires are enlightenment.”

Until his near-execution at Tatsunokuchi in the ninth month of 1271, the Daishonin had assumed the role of Bodhisattva Superior Practices, the votary whose appearance is predicted in the Lotus Sutra. He had spent all his time teaching the essence of the sutra and

propagating the faith. After Tatsunokuchi, he revealed his true identity as the Buddha who is one with the supreme Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. In this letter, the Daishonin teaches the significance of the daimoku from the standpoint of the Buddha who opens the way to Buddhahood for all humankind.

He first states that it is his great joy to meet persecutions as the votary of

the Lotus Sutra, because it is the sure way to attain Buddhahood. "Though the teaching I am now propagating seems limited, it is extremely profound. That is because it goes deeper than the teaching expounded by T'ien-t'ai, Dengyo, and others." He reveals that the ultimate Law of all Buddhas is none other than Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

## Notes

1. The "three important matters" refers to the Three Great Secret Laws: the object of devotion, the invocation of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, or the daimoku, and the sanctuary, or the place where one chants daimoku before the object of devotion.

2. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.

3. This statement has been attributed to T'ien-t'ai, but there is no documentary proof to support this.

4. Based on the "Teacher of the Law" chapter of the Lotus Sutra. This particular section reads: "If one of these good men or

good women in the time after I have passed into extinction is able to secretly expound the Lotus Sutra to one person, even one phrase of it, then you should know that he or she is the envoy of the Thus Come One. He has been dispatched by the Thus Come One and carries out the Thus Come One's work."

5. The Lotus school was originally another name for the Tendai school, which based itself on the Lotus Sutra. Later the term came to mean the Buddhism established by Nichiren Daishonin.