

Letter to the Sage Nichimyo



ONCE there was an ascetic named Aspiration for the Law. For twelve years, he traveled from country to country in search of the teachings of a Thus Come One. During that time, none of the three treasures—the Buddha, the Law, and the Order—were to be found. Nevertheless, the ascetic continued his quest for Buddhism as desperately as one who is thirsty seeks water, or as a starving person looks for food. One day a Brahman came to him and said, “I possess a verse of the sacred teaching. If you are a true seeker of Buddhism, I will impart it to you.” The ascetic beseeched him to do so. The Brahman then said: “To prove your sincerity, first peel off your skin for parchment, break off one of your bones for a writing brush, grind up its marrow for pigment, and draw your blood to mix the ink. If you are willing to do all these things and thus write down this teaching, I will teach you the Buddha’s verse.”

The ascetic was overjoyed. He peeled off his skin, dried it, and made parchment of it. He then did all the other things demanded of him, just as he had been told. When he had finished, the Brahman suddenly vanished. The ascetic bewailed his fate, now gazing up to the heavens, now flinging himself to the ground. The Buddha, sensing his sincerity, emerged from

beneath the earth and taught him as follows: “Practice what accords with the Law; do not practice what contradicts it. One who practices the Law will dwell in peace and security both in this life and in the next.”¹ The moment the ascetic heard this, he became a Buddha. This teaching consists of twenty Chinese characters.

Once [in a previous existence] when Shakyamuni was a wheel-turning king engaged in bodhisattva practice, he revered an eight-character phrase that stated: “One who is born is destined to die. To extinguish this cycle is to enter the joy of nirvana.”² As an offering to these eight characters, he gave his own body to fuel a thousand lanterns. Moreover, he urged others to inscribe those characters on stone walls and main roads so that people who read them would arouse the aspiration for enlightenment. The light of those lanterns reached as high as the heaven of the thirty-three gods, where it served as illumination for Shakra and the other heavenly deities.

In another past existence Shakyamuni was carrying out bodhisattva austerities in search of Buddhism. One day a leper said to him, “I possess the correct teaching, which consists of twenty characters. If you will massage my leprosy body, embrace, and lick it, feeding me two or three pounds of your own flesh every day, I will impart the teaching

to you.” Shakyamuni did exactly as the leper said. As a result, he obtained the twenty-character teaching and attained Buddhahood. The teaching went, “The Thus Come One is enlightened to the truth of nirvana, and has forever freed himself from the sufferings of birth and death. Anyone who wholeheartedly listens to him will surely obtain immeasurable joy.”³

There was once a boy called Snow Mountains who lived in the Snow Mountains. Although he had mastered all non-Buddhist teachings, he had not yet encountered Buddhism. Then, one day, he happened to hear a terrifying demon recite a verse that began: “All is changeable, nothing is constant. This is the law of birth and death.” The demon, however, spoke only the first eight characters of the verse, leaving the rest unsaid. Although the boy was exceedingly glad to have heard the first eight characters, he felt as though he had been given only half a wish-granting jewel. It was like a plant that flowers but bears no fruit. When the boy asked for the remaining eight characters, the demon replied, “I have had nothing to eat for several days. I am too dazed with hunger to preach the remaining eight characters. First give me some food!” The boy asked, “What do you eat?” The demon answered, “I feed on the warm flesh and blood of human beings. Though I can fly anywhere throughout the four continents in the space of a moment, I can obtain no warm flesh and blood. Human beings are protected by the heavenly gods, so I cannot kill them unless they commit evil.”

The boy Snow Mountains said, “I will make you an offering of my own body, so teach me the remaining eight characters so that I can leave the whole teaching behind.” The demon said, “You are a cunning fellow, aren’t you? Surely you are trying to deceive me.” The boy replied, “If one is offered gold

and silver in exchange for shards and rubble, should one not accept it? If I die to no purpose on this mountain, then my body will be devoured by kites, owls, wolves, and tigers, and will bring me no benefit whatsoever. On the other hand, if I give my life for the remaining eight characters, it will be like exchanging dung for food.”

The demon was still suspicious. The boy assured him, “There are those who will vouch for my honesty. Like the Buddhas of ages past, I call upon the great heavenly king Brahma, the heavenly lord Shakra, the gods of the sun and moon, and the four heavenly kings to be my witnesses.” Finally the demon consented to impart the second half of the verse. The boy removed his deer-skin garment and spread it out for the demon to sit upon. Then he knelt down and joined his palms together in supplication, begging the demon to be seated. The fierce demon complied and began to recite, “Extinguishing the cycle of birth and death, one enters the joy of nirvana.” When the boy had learned the entire verse, he inscribed it on trees and stones. This completed, he cast himself into the demon’s mouth. The boy Snow Mountains was actually Shakyamuni in one of his past existences, while the demon was Shakra in disguise.⁴

Bodhisattva Medicine King burned his arms for seventy-two thousand years as an offering to the Lotus Sutra.⁵ Bodhisattva Never Disparaging was for many years cursed and humiliated, beaten with sticks and staves, and pelted with tiles and stones by countless monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen because he venerated them by uttering the twenty-four characters that read: “I have profound reverence for you, I would never dare treat you with disparagement or arrogance. Why? Because you are all practicing the bodhisattva way and are certain to attain Buddhahood.”⁶ Bodhisattva Never Disparaging

was Shakyamuni Buddha in one of his past lifetimes. King Suzudan performed menial labor in the service of the seer Asita⁷ for a thousand years in order to receive the five characters of Myohorenge-kyo. He even went so far as to make a bed of his own body for his master. As a result, he was reborn as Shakyamuni Buddha.

The Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law consists of eight volumes. Reading these eight volumes is in effect equal to reading sixteen, for the sutra was expounded by Shakyamuni Buddha and verified by Many Treasures Buddha. The sixteen volumes, in turn, represent innumerable volumes, for the Buddhas of the ten directions verified their truth. In the same way, each character in the sutra equals two, for it was uttered by Shakyamuni and confirmed by Many Treasures. Again, a single character equals innumerable others, for the validity of the sutra was attested to by the Buddhas of the ten directions. The treasures bestowed by a single wish-granting jewel equal those bestowed by two such jewels or by innumerable jewels. Likewise, each character in the Lotus Sutra is like a single wish-granting jewel, and the innumerable characters of the sutra are like innumerable jewels. The character *myo* was uttered by two tongues: the tongues of Shakyamuni and Many Treasures. The tongues of these two Buddhas are like an eight-petaled lotus flower, one petal overlapping another, on which rests a jewel, the character of *myo*.

The jewel of the character *myo* contains all the benefits that the Thus Come One Shakyamuni received by practicing the six paramitas in his past existences: the benefits he obtained through the practice of almsgiving by offering his body to a starving tigress⁸ and by giving his life in exchange for that of a dove;⁹ the benefits he obtained when he was King Shrutasoma who kept his word, though it meant his death,

in order to observe the precepts;¹⁰ the benefits he obtained as an ascetic called Forbearance by enduring the tortures inflicted upon him by King Kali;¹¹ the benefits he obtained as Prince Earnest Donor¹² and as the ascetic Shojari,¹³ and all his other benefits. We, the people of this evil latter age, have not formed even a single good cause, but [by bestowing upon us the jewel of *myo*] Shakyamuni has granted us the same benefit as if we ourselves had fulfilled all the practices of the six paramitas. This precisely accords with his statement "Now this threefold world is all my domain, and the living beings in it are all my children."¹⁴ Bound as we common mortals are by earthly desires, we can instantly attain the same virtues as Shakyamuni Buddha, for we receive all the benefits that he accumulated. The sutra reads, "Hoping to make all persons equal to me, without any distinction between us."¹⁵ This means that those who believe in and practice the Lotus Sutra are equal to Shakyamuni Buddha.

To illustrate, a father and mother unite in conjugal harmony to give birth to a child. No one can dispute that the child is the flesh and blood of its parents. A calf begotten by an ox king will become an ox king; it will never become a lion king. A cub sired by a lion king will become a lion king; it will never become a human king or heavenly king. Now the votaries of the Lotus Sutra are the children of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, as the sutra states, "The living beings in it are all my children." It is not difficult for them to become kings of the Law just as Shakyamuni Buddha did.

Unfilial children, however, are not allowed to succeed their parents. King Yao had an heir named Tan Chu, and King Shun had a prince named Shang Chün. As both sons were lacking in filial piety, they were disowned by their respective fathers and demoted to the rank of commoners. Ch'ung-hua and

Yü were the children of commoners, but both were extremely filial. Hearing of this, King Yao and King Shun summoned Ch'ung-hua and Yü, and abdicated their thrones to them. Commoners became royalty in a day. Just as a commoner can become a king in this present life, so can an ordinary person become a Buddha instantly. This is the heart of the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life.

How, then, can we obtain this benefit? Should we peel off our skins as the ascetic Aspiration for the Law did, follow the boy Snow Mountains' example and offer our bodies to a demon, or emulate Bodhisattva Medicine King in burning our arms? As the Great Teacher Chang-an stated, "You should let your choices be fitting and never adhere solely to one or the other."¹⁶ The practice we should perform in order to master the correct teaching and attain Buddhahood depends upon the times. If there were no paper in Japan, then you should peel off your skin. If the Lotus Sutra had not yet been introduced to our country and a single demon were to appear who knew it, then you should offer your body to him. If there were no oil available in our country, then you should burn your arms. But of what use is it to peel off our skin when the country has an abundant supply of heavy paper?

Hsüan-tsang journeyed throughout India in search of the Buddha's teachings for seventeen years, covering a distance of a hundred thousand *ri*. Dengyo remained in T'ang China for only two years, but he traveled three thousand *ri* across the billowing sea to get there. These were all men, ancients, worthies, and sages. Never have I heard of a woman who journeyed a thousand *ri* in search of Buddhism as you did. True, the dragon king's daughter attained enlightenment without chang-

ing her present form, and the nun Mahaprajapati received a prediction that she would become a Buddha in the future. I am not certain, but they may have been female forms assumed by Buddhas or bodhisattvas. After all, those events occurred in the Buddha's lifetime.

The character of man and woman differs from the outset. Fire is hot, and water, cold. Fishermen are skilled in catching fish, and hunters are proficient in trapping deer. A sutra states that women are clever at being jealous, but I have never heard that women are clever at Buddhism. A woman's mind is compared to a refreshing breeze; even if one could bind the wind, it would be hard to grasp a woman's mind. A woman's mind is likened to writing on water because the characters do not remain on the surface. A woman is likened to a liar, for sometimes a liar's words are true, and sometimes, false. A woman's mind is compared to a river, for all rivers bend.

The Lotus Sutra, however, contains such phrases as "honestly discarding expedient means,"¹⁷ "all that you [Shakyamuni] have expounded is the truth,"¹⁸ "honest and upright, gentle in intent,"¹⁹ and "gentle, peaceful, honest, and upright."²⁰ Those who believe in this sutra, therefore, must have minds that are as straight as a taut bowstring or a carpenter's inking line. One may call dung sandalwood, but it will not have the sandalwood's fragrance. A liar never becomes a truthful person simply because one calls him honest. All the sutras are the Buddha's golden teachings, his true words. When compared with the Lotus Sutra, however, they are false, flattering, abusive, or double-tongued.²¹ The Lotus Sutra alone is the truth of truths. Only honest people can keep faith in this sutra, a teaching free from all falsehood. Certainly you are a woman who believes in the [Buddha's] true words.

Think of it! Even if one were to meet a person who could cross the ocean carrying Mount Sumeru on his head, one could never find a woman like you. Even though one might find a person who could steam sand and make boiled rice of it, one could never meet a woman like you. You should know that Shakyamuni Buddha, Many Treasures Buddha, the Buddhas of the ten directions who are Shakyamuni's emanations, great bodhisattvas such as Superior Practices and Boundless Practices, Brahma, Shakra, the four heavenly kings, and other deities will protect you, just as a shadow accompanies the body. You are the foremost votary of the Lotus Sutra among the women of Japan. Therefore, following the example of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, I bestow on you the Buddhist name Sage Nichimyo.²²

From Kamakura in Sagami Province to the northern province of Sado is a journey of more than a thousand *ri* over treacherous mountains and raging seas. There are sudden onslaughts of wind and rain, bandits lurk in the mountains, and pirates lie in wait on the sea. The people at every stage and

every post town are as bestial as dogs or tigers, and you must have felt as though you were undergoing the sufferings of the three evil paths in this life. Moreover, we live in troubled times. Since last year rebels have filled our country, and finally, on the eleventh day of the second month of this year, a battle broke out.²³ It is now almost the end of the fifth month, but society has not yet been restored to peace and security. Nevertheless, despite all the risks involved, you traveled to Sado carrying your infant daughter, since her father, from whom you have long been separated, was not to be depended upon for her care.

I cannot even imagine the hardships you must have suffered during your journey, much less describe them in words, so I will lay down my writing brush.

Nichiren

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

To the Sage Nichimyo



Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter while at Ichinosawa on Sado Island and addressed it to a follower in Kamakura, a woman who had separated from her husband at a young age. Little is known about her except that she undertook the long and perilous journey from Kamakura with her infant daughter Oto to visit the Daishonin during his exile on Sado. The Daishonin was so impressed with this demonstration of faith that he wrote this letter, giving her the Buddhist name Sage Nichimyo (Sun Wonderful).

After the Daishonin went to live at Minobu, she again visited him there, and later, in the eighth month of 1275, the Daishonin sent her a letter addressed to her daughter, which was later given the title *The Supremacy of the Law*, suggesting that she was welcome to stay at Minobu should there be the need.

In the beginning of this letter, the Daishonin cites seven stories of Shakyamuni's bodhisattva practices in his past existences. By carrying out such severe practices in pursuit of Buddhism, Shakyamuni was able to attain Buddhahood.

In effect, the Daishonin likens Nichimyo's efforts in journeying to Sado to these bodhisattva austerities, and implies that her seeking spirit will ensure her enlightenment.

In the next part, Nichiren Daishonin explains that the practice of his Buddhism is not as difficult as that of Shakyamuni's Buddhism, because Nam-myoho-enge-kyo contains all the benefits that Shakyamuni Buddha accumulated through lifetimes of bodhisattva austerities. Therefore, by chanting

Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, we ordinary people can in this lifetime attain the same virtues and benefits as Shakyamuni Buddha himself. This is the central theme of this letter, in which the Daishonin explains the essence of his teaching: By chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, an ordinary person can become a Buddha.

In the final portion, the Daishonin praises her strong faith and confers upon her the title of sage, indicating that she will become a Buddha.

Notes

1. *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*.
2. Repaying Debts of Gratitude Sutra.
3. Nirvana Sutra.
4. This story appears in the Nirvana Sutra.
5. Lotus Sutra, chap. 23.
6. *Ibid.*, chap. 20.
7. This story is recounted in the "Devadatta" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, though the name Suzudan is not specifically mentioned.
8. According to the Golden Light Sutra, in a past existence, Shakyamuni was engaged in the paramita of almsgiving as Prince Sattva, son of King Maharatha. He found an injured tigress that had given birth and was too weak with hunger to feed her cubs. At that time he gave his body as an offering to feed her.
9. According to *The Garland of Birth Stories*, one day the god Vishvakarman disguised himself as a dove and Shakra changed himself into a hawk to test King Shibi. The hawk pursued the dove, which flew into King Shibi's robes for protection. To save the dove, Shibi offered his own flesh to the hungry hawk. King Shibi was Shakyamuni in one of his past existences when he was carrying out the paramita of almsgiving.
10. Shrutasoma, also called Universal Brightness, was the name of Shakyamuni when he was a king in a past existence engaged in the paramita of observing precepts. According to *Great Perfection of Wisdom*, King Universal Brightness and 99 other kings (999 kings according to another source) had been captured by King Deer

Feet and were about to be killed. King Universal Brightness asked King Deer Feet to let him keep a promise he had made to give offerings to a certain monk. Deer Feet granted him seven days' grace to fulfill his promise, and Universal Brightness returned to his country, where he gave the monk offerings and transferred the throne to his son. After proclaiming to the people that keeping one's promise is the most important precept, he returned to King Deer Feet; the latter was so impressed by the captured king's sincerity that he released him and the other kings, and moreover, converted to Buddhism.

11. This story appears in the Sutra on the Wise and the Foolish. The ascetic Forbearance was Shakyamuni when he was carrying out the paramita of forbearance in a past existence. The ascetic once preached the paramita to the female attendants of King Kali of Varanasi. The king assumed that the ascetic had been trying to seduce them and flew into a rage. Being informed that the ascetic was engaged in the practice of forbearance, the king cut off his hands, legs, ears, and nose. But the ascetic did not flinch. His blood turned into milk, and his body restored itself. At this sight, the king repented his conduct and thereafter protected the ascetic.

12. This story appears in the Sutra on the Wise and the Foolish and elsewhere. Born to a royal family, Prince Earnest Donor felt pity for the poor and suffering people of his country, and implored his father to give all his treasures to them. When his father had exhausted his treasures, the prince went into the sea to look

for a fabulous wish-granting jewel owned by the dragon king. He faced many obstacles but finally found the jewel and, bringing it back with him, caused treasures to rain down upon his people. This prince was Shakyamuni in a past existence.

13. Shojari was the name of Shakyamuni when he was an ascetic practicing the paramita of meditation in a past existence. According to *Great Perfection of Wisdom*, while Shojari was engaged in meditation, a bird happened to build a nest in his hair and laid several eggs. One day he gained a great insight, but, being aware of the eggs on his head, he did not move until they had hatched and the baby birds were able to fly away.

14. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.

15. Ibid., chap. 2.

16. *The Annotations on the Nirvana Sutra*.

17. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.

18. Ibid., chap. II.

19. Ibid., chap. 16.

20. Ibid.

21. These correspond to the four verbal evils of lying, flattery (or random and irresponsible speech), defamation, and duplicity.

22. In chapter 20 of the Lotus Sutra, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, showing respect toward all people for their innate Buddha nature, predicted that they would become Buddhas in the future. In the same spirit, Nichiren Daishonin gave the recipient of this letter the Buddhist name Sage Nichimyo. *Nichi* of Nichimyo comes from Nichiren, indicating the sun, and *myo*, or wonderful, is that of Myoho-rence-kyo.

23. Hojo Tokisuke, an elder half brother of the regent Hojo Tokimune, had been plotting to seize power, but Tokimune heard of the plot and quickly suppressed it by having his brother killed.