

On Practicing the Buddha's Teachings



ON examination [of the Lotus Sutra], we find that those who are born in this land and believe in this sutra when it is propagated in the Latter Day of the Law will be subjected to hatred and jealousy even greater than that which arose in the lifetime of the Thus Come One. In that age, the master who taught and converted the people was the Buddha, and his disciples were great bodhisattvas and arhats. Moreover, the Buddha expounded the Lotus Sutra only after he had developed and trained the living beings who were to hear it, including the human and heavenly beings, the four kinds of believers, and the nonhuman beings such as the eight kinds of beings. Still, many of them harbored hatred and jealousy.

Now, in the Latter Day of the Law, though the teaching, the people's capacity, and the time for propagation are in accord, we must expect all the more hostility. For this is the age when quarrels and disputes prevail, and the pure Law is obscured and lost.¹ Moreover, the teacher is but an ordinary practitioner, and his disciples come from among evil people defiled by the three poisons. For this reason, people shun the good teacher and associate with evil teachers.

What is more, once you become a disciple or lay supporter of the votary

who practices the true Lotus Sutra in accord with the Buddha's teachings, you are bound to face the three types of enemies. Therefore, from the very day you listen to [and take faith in] this sutra, you should be fully prepared to face the great persecutions of the three types of enemies that are certain to be more horrible now after the Buddha's passing. Although my disciples had already heard this, when both great and small persecutions confronted us, some were so astounded and terrified that they even forsook their faith. Did I not warn you in advance? I have been teaching you day and night directly from the sutra, which says, "Since hatred and jealousy toward this sutra abound even when the Thus Come One is in the world, how much more will this be so after his passing?"² You have no reason at all to be frightened when you see or hear that I have been driven from my dwelling place, wounded, and, having incurred the wrath of the rulers, sent into exile in distant provinces twice.

Question: The votaries who practice according to the Buddha's teachings should "enjoy peace and security in their present existence."³ Why then are you beset by the three powerful enemies?

Answer: Shakyamuni Buddha faced the nine great persecutions for the sake

of the Lotus Sutra. In the distant past, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging was likewise attacked with staves, tiles, and stones. Chu Tao-sheng was banished to a mountain in Su-chou, the Tripitaka Master Fa-tao was branded on the face, and the Venerable Aryasimha was beheaded. The Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai was opposed by the seven schools of the north and the three schools of the south, and the Great Teacher Dengyo was hated by the six schools [of Nara]. The Buddha and these bodhisattvas and great sages were all votaries of the Lotus Sutra, yet they suffered great persecutions. If you deny that they practiced according to the Buddha's teachings, then where can you find those who did? This is the age of conflict in which the pure Law has been lost. Moreover, in this evil country, the ruler, his ministers, and even the common people are without exception tainted by evil. They have opposed the correct teaching and revered erroneous doctrines and teachers instead. Therefore, demons have burst into the country, causing the three calamities and seven disasters to strike again and again.

This is indeed an accursed time to live in this land! However, the Buddha has commanded me to be born in this age, and it is impossible for me to go against the decree of the Dharma King. And so, as the sutra dictates, I have launched the battle between the provisional and the true teachings. Donning the armor of endurance and girding myself with the sword of the wonderful teaching, I have raised the banner of the five characters of Myoho-renge-kyo, the heart of the entire eight volumes of the Lotus Sutra. Then, drawing the bow of the Buddha's declaration, "I have not yet revealed the truth,"⁴ and notching the arrow of "honestly discarding the provisional teachings,"⁵ I have mounted the carriage drawn by the great white ox⁶ and battered down the gates of the provi-

sional teachings. Attacking first one and then another, I have refuted opponents from the eight and ten schools, such as the Nembutsu, True Word, Zen, and Precepts. Some have fled headlong while others have retreated, and still others have been captured to become my disciples. I continue to repulse their attacks and to defeat them, but legions of enemies exist who oppose the single Dharma King and the handful who follow him. So the battle goes on even today.

"The Lotus Sutra is the teaching of shakubuku, the refutation of the provisional doctrines."⁷ True to the letter of this golden saying, in the end, every last one of the believers of the provisional teachings and schools will be defeated and join the retinue of the Dharma King. The time will come when all people will abandon the various kinds of vehicles and take up the single vehicle of Buddhahood, and the Mystic Law alone will flourish throughout the land. When the people all chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the wind will no longer buffet the branches, and the rain will no longer break the clods of soil. The world will become as it was in the ages of Fu Hsi and Shen Nung.⁸ In their present existence the people will be freed from misfortune and disasters and learn the art of living long. Realize that the time will come when the truth will be revealed that both the person and the Law are unaging and eternal. There cannot be the slightest doubt about the sutra's promise of "peace and security in their present existence."

Question: How should one practice if one is to be faithful to the Buddha's teachings?

Answer: The Japanese people of this age are one in their opinion of what practice accords with the Buddha's teachings. They believe that, since all vehicles are opened up and incorporated in the one vehicle of Buddhahood,

no teaching is superior or inferior, shallow or profound, but all are equal to the Lotus Sutra. Hence the belief that chanting the Nembutsu, embracing the True Word teaching, practicing Zen meditation, or professing and reciting any sutra or the name of any Buddha or bodhisattva equals following the Lotus Sutra.

But I insist that this is wrong. The most important thing in practicing the Buddhist teachings is to follow and uphold the Buddha's golden words, not the opinions of others. Our teacher, the Thus Come One Shakyamuni, wished to reveal the Lotus Sutra from the moment he first attained the way. However, because the people were not yet mature enough to understand, he had to employ provisional teachings as expedient means for some forty years before he could expound the true teaching of the Lotus Sutra.

In the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra, which serves as an introduction to the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha drew the line between the provisional teachings and the true teaching, and clearly distinguished the expedient means from the truth. He declared, "[Preaching the Law in various different ways], I made use of the power of expedient means. But in these more than forty years, I have not yet revealed the truth."⁹ The eighty thousand bodhisattvas, including Great Adornment, understood perfectly why Shakyamuni had preached the provisional teachings, demonstrated that they were nothing more than expedient means, and finally discarded them entirely.¹⁰ They expressed their understanding by declaring that one "will in the end fail to gain unsurpassed enlightenment"¹¹ by embracing any of the sutras that were preached before the Lotus Sutra and that require countless kalpas of practice [to attain Buddhahood].

Finally the Buddha was ready to preach the Lotus Sutra, the revelation

section of his entire body of teachings,¹² and stated, "The World-Honored One has long expounded his doctrines and now must reveal the truth."¹³ He also warned, "[In the Buddha lands of the ten directions there is only the Law of the one vehicle], there are not two, there are not three, except when the Buddha preaches so as an expedient means,"¹⁴ and taught, "honestly discarding expedient means"¹⁵ and "not accepting a single verse of the other sutras."¹⁶ Thus, ever since that time, the Mystic Law, "the Law of the one vehicle" of Buddhahood, has been the only teaching that enables all people to become Buddhas. Although no sutra other than the Lotus Sutra can provide even the slightest benefit, the scholars of the Latter Day claim that all sutras must lead to enlightenment because they were expounded by the Thus Come One. Therefore, they arbitrarily profess faith in any sutra and follow whatever school they choose, whether True Word, Nembutsu, Zen, Three Treatises, Dharma Characteristics, Dharma Analysis Treasury, Establishment of Truth, or Precepts. The Buddha said of such people, "If a person fails to have faith but instead slanders this sutra, immediately he will destroy all the seeds for becoming a Buddha in this world. . . . When his life comes to an end he will enter the Avichi hell."¹⁷ Thus the Buddha himself concluded that one's practice accords with the Buddha's teachings only when one bases one's faith firmly on the standard of these sutra passages, believing fully that "there is only the Law of the one vehicle."

Question: Then it would be wrong to say that faith in any sutra or any Buddha of the expedient and provisional teachings equals faith in the Lotus Sutra. But what of those who believe only in the Lotus Sutra and carry out the five practices set forth in the sutra or follow the practices described in the "Peaceful Practices"

chapter? Could we not say that their practice accords with the Buddha's teachings?

Answer: Anyone who practices Buddhism should first understand the two types of practice—shoju and shakubuku. All the sutras and treatises fall into one or the other of these two categories. Though scholars in this country may have studied Buddhism extensively, they do not know which practice accords with the time. The four seasons continually repeat themselves, each in turn manifesting its own characteristics. In summer it is hot; in winter, cold. Flowers blossom in spring, and fruit ripens in autumn. Therefore, it is only natural to sow seeds in spring and reap the harvest in fall. If one sowed in autumn, could one harvest in spring? Heavy clothing is useful in bitter cold, but of what use is it in sweltering heat? A cool breeze is pleasant in summer, but what good is it in winter? Buddhism works in the same way. There is a time when the Hinayana teachings are disseminated for the benefit of humanity, a time when the provisional Mahayana doctrines are disseminated for the benefit of humanity, and a time when the true Mahayana teaching is spread to enable people to obtain the fruit of Buddhahood. The two millennia of the Former and Middle Days of the Law required the spread of the Hinayana and provisional Mahayana teachings, but the first five hundred years of the Latter Day call for only the Lotus Sutra, the pure and perfect teaching of the one vehicle of Buddhahood, to be spread abroad widely. As predicted by the Buddha, now is the age of quarrels and disputes when the pure Law becomes obscured and lost, and the provisional and true teachings are hopelessly confused.

When one must face enemies, one needs a sword, a stick, or a bow and arrows. When one has no enemies,

however, such weapons are of no use at all. In this age, the provisional teachings have turned into enemies of the true teaching. When the time is right to propagate the teaching of the one vehicle, the provisional teachings become enemies. When they are a source of confusion, they must be thoroughly refuted from the standpoint of the true teaching. Of the two types of practice, this is shakubuku, the practice of the Lotus Sutra. With good reason T'ien-t'ai stated, "The Lotus Sutra is the teaching of shakubuku, the refutation of the provisional doctrines."

The four peaceful practices¹⁸ [in the "Peaceful Practices" chapter] correspond to shoju. To carry them out in this age would be as foolish as sowing seeds in winter and expecting to reap the harvest in spring. It is natural for a rooster to crow at dawn, but strange for him to crow at dusk. Now, when the true and the provisional teachings are utterly confused, it would be equally unnatural for one to seclude oneself in the mountain forests and carry out the peaceful practice of shoju without refuting the enemies of the Lotus Sutra. One would lose the chance to practice the Lotus Sutra.

Now, in the Latter Day of the Law, who is carrying out the practice of shakubuku in strict accordance with the Lotus Sutra? Suppose someone, no matter who, should unrelentingly proclaim that the Lotus Sutra alone can lead people to Buddhahood, and that all other sutras, far from enabling them to attain the way, only drive them into hell. Observe what happens should that person thus try to refute the teachers and the doctrines of all the other schools. The three powerful enemies will arise without fail.

Our teacher, the Thus Come One Shakyamuni, practiced shakubuku during the last eight years of his lifetime, the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai for more than thirty years, and the Great Teacher

Dengyo for more than twenty. I have been refuting the provisional doctrines for more than twenty years, and the great persecutions I have suffered during this period are beyond number. I do not know whether they are equal to the nine great persecutions suffered by the Buddha, but surely neither T'ien-t'ai nor Dengyo ever faced persecutions as great as mine for the sake of the Lotus Sutra. They encountered only hatred, envy, and slander, whereas I twice incurred the wrath of the rulers and was exiled to remote provinces. Furthermore, I was nearly beheaded at Tatsunokuchi, wounded on the forehead [at Komatsubara], and slandered time and again. My disciples have also been exiled and thrown into prison, and my lay supporters have been evicted and had their fiefs confiscated. How can the persecutions faced by Nagarjuna, T'ien-t'ai, or Dengyo possibly compare with these? Understand then that the votary who practices the Lotus Sutra exactly as the Buddha teaches will without fail be attacked by the three powerful enemies.

In the more than two thousand years that have passed since the Buddha's advent, Shakyamuni himself, T'ien-t'ai, and Dengyo were the only three who perfectly carried out the Buddha's teachings. Now in the Latter Day of the Law, Nichiren and his disciples and lay believers are just such practitioners. If we cannot be called votaries faithful to the Buddha's teachings, then neither can Shakyamuni, T'ien-t'ai, or Dengyo. Could Devadatta, Kokalika, Sunakshatra, Kobo, Jikaku, Chisho, Shan-tao, Honen, Ryokan, and others like them be called votaries of the Lotus Sutra? Could Shakyamuni Buddha, T'ien-t'ai, Dengyo, or Nichiren and his disciples and lay believers be the practitioners of the Nembutsu, True Word, Zen, Precepts, or other schools? Could the Lotus Sutra be called an expedient and provisional

teaching, and the sutras of the Nembutsu and other schools be the Lotus Sutra? None of this could ever be possible, even if east were to become west and west become east; even if the earth and all its trees and plants were to fly up and become the heavens, and the sun, the moon, and the stars were to tumble down and become the earth.

What a great pity it is that all the Japanese people are delighted to see Nichiren and his disciples and lay believers suffer at the hands of the three powerful enemies! What befell another yesterday may befall oneself today. Nichiren and his followers have but a short time to endure—merely the time it takes for frost or dew to vanish in the morning sun. When our prayers for Buddhahood are answered and we are dwelling in the true land of Tranquil Light where we will experience the boundless joy of the Law, what pity we will feel for those who sink to the bottom of the great citadel of the Avichi hell and meet extreme suffering there! How they will envy us then!

Life flashes by in but a moment. No matter how many terrible enemies you may encounter, banish all fears and never think of backsliding. Even if someone were to cut off our heads with a saw, impale our bodies with lances, or shackle our feet and bore them through with a gimlet, as long as we are alive, we must keep chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Then, if we chant until the very moment of death, Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and the Buddhas of the ten directions will come to us instantly, exactly as they promised during the ceremony at Eagle Peak. Taking our hands and bearing us on their shoulders, they will carry us to Eagle Peak. The two sages,¹⁹ the two heavenly kings,²⁰ and the ten demon daughters will guard us, while all the heavenly gods and benevolent deities will raise a canopy over our heads and unfurl

banners on high. They will escort us under their protection to the treasure land of Tranquil Light. How can such joy possibly be described!

Nichiren

The fifth month of the tenth year of

Bun'ei (1273), cyclical sign *mizumoto-tori*

To all my followers

Keep this letter with you at all times and read it over and over.



Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter to all his followers in the fifth month of 1273, while he was still enduring the severe privations of exile on Sado Island. The title, *On Practicing the Buddha's Teachings*, indicates practicing in exact accordance with what the Buddha taught.

This title can be said to indicate two important points. One is that Nichiren Daishonin lived in accord with Shakyamuni's teachings and fulfilled all the prophecies of the Lotus Sutra. The other is that the Daishonin's followers in the Latter Day of the Law are to carry out and fulfill his teachings.

In this letter the question is raised: Why must believers experience hardships when the Lotus Sutra promises "peace and security in their present existence"? Nichiren Daishonin answers that those who practice the Lotus Sutra exactly according to the Buddha's teachings are bound to face the three

powerful enemies, whose appearance was predicted in the "Encouraging Devotion" chapter of the sutra. In other words, one proves oneself to be a true votary only by facing and overcoming great obstacles for the sake of the Buddha's teachings. In essence, this means to forthrightly make clear what is the correct teaching of Buddhism and to mercifully transmit the teaching to others.

One month before writing this letter, the Daishonin completed the treatise *The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind*, in which he revealed the true object of devotion—the Gohonzon—for the people of the Latter Day of the Law. He also revealed that the practice based on it—chanting with firm faith in it—leads to enlightenment. This present letter was written subsequently to clarify the importance of another practice—shakubuku, or spreading this teaching to others.

Notes

1. A reference to a description of the fifth five-hundred-year period in the Great Collection Sutra, which says that, in this age, rival Buddhist schools will quarrel endlessly among themselves and Shakyamuni's correct teaching will be obscured and lost.

2. Lotus Sutra, chap. 10.

3. *Ibid.*, chap. 5.

4. Immeasurable Meanings Sutra.

5. Nichiren Daishonin here cites the

phrase "honestly discarding expedient means" from chapter 2 of the Lotus Sutra with a slight alteration.

6. "The carriage drawn by the great white ox" symbolizes the supreme vehicle of Buddhahood, described in the parable of the three carts and the burning house that appears in the "Simile and Parable" chapter of the Lotus Sutra.

7. This is T'ien-t'ai's statement from *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*.

8. Fu Hsi and Shen Nung were legendary kings who reigned over ideal societies in ancient China.

9. Immeasurable Meanings Sutra.

10. The wording of the Japanese text has been slightly adjusted for clarity in this paragraph.

11. Immeasurable Meanings Sutra.

12. Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings can be divided into three parts—preparation, revelation, and transmission. Preparation indicates the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings; revelation indicates the Immeasurable Meanings, Lotus, and Universal Worthy sutras; and transmission indicates the Nirvana Sutra.

13. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, chap. 3.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Practice by peaceful deeds, words, thoughts, and vows, as set forth in the "Peaceful Practices" chapter of the Lotus Sutra.

19. The bodhisattvas Medicine King and Brave Donor.

20. Vaishravana and Upholder of the Nation, two of the four heavenly kings (*see* Glossary).