

Hell Is the Land of Tranquil Light



I HAVE received your offering of various articles. Nothing would please me more than to know that you have communicated with the late Ueno, but I know that that is impossible. Unless it was in a dream, it is unlikely that you have seen him. Unless it was an illusion, how could you have seen him? Surely your late husband is in the pure land of Eagle Peak, listening and watching over this saha world day and night. You, his wife, and your children have only mortal senses, so you cannot see or hear him, but be assured that you will eventually be reunited [on Eagle Peak].

The men with whom you have exchanged marriage vows over the course of all your previous lifetimes must outnumber even the grains of sand in the ocean. Your vows this time, however, were ones made with your true husband. The reason is that it was due to his encouragement that you became a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra. Thus you should revere him as a Buddha. When he was alive, he was a Buddha in life, and now he is a Buddha in death. He is a Buddha in both life and death. This is what is meant by that most important doctrine called attaining Buddhahood in one's present form. The fourth volume of the Lotus Sutra states, "If one can uphold this [sutra], one will be upholding the Buddha's body."¹

Neither the pure land nor hell exists

outside oneself; both lie only within one's own heart. Awakened to this, one is called a Buddha; deluded about it, one is called an ordinary person. The Lotus Sutra reveals this truth, and one who embraces the Lotus Sutra will realize that hell is itself the Land of Tranquil Light.

Even if one were to practice the provisional teachings for immeasurable millions of years, if one should turn away from the Lotus Sutra, it would simply always be hell. I did not make this assertion; it was decided by Shakyamuni Buddha, Many Treasures Buddha, and the emanation Buddhas of the ten directions. To practice the provisional teachings is to be like a person scorched by fire who goes deeper into the flames, or like a drowning person sinking farther toward the bottom of the depths. Those who fail to embrace the Lotus Sutra are like persons going into fire or water. Those who rely on such evil teachers as Honen, Kobo, and other slanderers of the Lotus Sutra and believe in the Amida or Mahavairocana Sutra are going farther and farther into the fire or deeper and deeper into the depths of the water. How can they possibly escape agony? They will doubtless fall into the fiery pits of the hell of repeated rebirth for torture, the hell of black cords, and the hell of incessant suffering, or sink into the icy

depths of the hell of the crimson lotus and the hell of the great crimson lotus.² The second volume of the Lotus Sutra reads, "When his life comes to an end he will enter the Avichi hell, [be confined there for a whole kalpa, and when the kalpa ends, be born there again]. He will keep repeating this cycle for a countless number of kalpas."³

Your late husband has escaped such agonies, for he was a lay supporter of Nichiren, the votary of the Lotus Sutra. The sutra reads, "If someone . . . should enter a great fire, the fire could not burn him. . . . If one were washed away by a great flood and called upon his name, one would immediately find oneself in a shallow place."⁴ It also reads, "The good fortune you gain thereby . . . cannot be burned by fire or washed away by water." How reassuring! How encouraging!

After all, even if one looks for hell in some faraway place, the iron rods of the wardens of hell and the accusing cries of the demon guards do not exist apart from one. This teaching is of prime importance, but I will impart it to you just as Bodhisattva Manjushri explained the secret teaching of the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form to the dragon king's daughter. After hearing it, strive even more earnestly in faith. One who, on hearing the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, makes even greater efforts in faith is a true seeker of the way. T'ien-t'ai states, "From the indigo, an even deeper blue."⁵ This passage means that, if one dyes something repeatedly in indigo, it becomes even bluer than the indigo leaves. The Lotus Sutra is like the indigo, and the strength of one's practice is like the deepening blue.

The two characters for hell can be interpreted to mean digging a hole in the ground. Can anyone avoid having a hole dug for them when they die? This is what is called "hell." The flames that

burn one's body are the fires of the hell of incessant suffering. One's wife, children, and relatives vying for position around one's body as they move toward the grave are the wardens and demon guards of hell. The plaintive cries of one's family are the voices of the guards and wardens of hell. One's two-and-a-half-foot-long walking stick is the iron rod of torture in hell. The horses and oxen that carry one's body are the horse-headed and ox-headed demons, and the grave is the great citadel of the hell of incessant suffering. The eighty-four thousand earthly desires are eighty-four thousand cauldrons in hell. One's body leaves home for the mountain of death, while the river beside which one's filial children stand in grief is the river of three crossings. It is utterly useless to look for hell anywhere else.

Those who embrace the Lotus Sutra, however, can turn all this around. Hell becomes the Land of Tranquil Light; the burning fires of agony become the torch of the wisdom of a Thus Come One of the reward body; the dead person becomes a Thus Come One of the Dharma body; and the fiery inferno, the "room of great pity and compassion"⁶ where a Thus Come One of the manifested body abides. Moreover, the walking stick becomes the walking stick of the true aspect, or the Mystic Law; the river of three crossings becomes the ocean of "the sufferings of birth and death are nirvana"; and the mountain of death becomes the towering peak of "earthly desires are enlightenment." Please think of it in this way. Both attaining Buddhahood in one's present form and "opening the door of Buddha wisdom"⁷ refer to realizing this and to awakening to it. Devadatta's changing the Avichi hell into the blissful Land of Tranquil Light, and the dragon king's daughter's attaining Buddhahood without changing her form, were nothing other than this. It is be-

cause the Lotus Sutra saves those who oppose it as well as those who follow it. This is the blessing of the single character *myō*, or mystic.

Bodhisattva Nagarjuna stated, “[The Lotus Sutra is] like a great physician who can change poison into medicine.”⁸ The Great Teacher Miao-lo stated, “How can one seek the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light anywhere apart from Buddhagaya? This saha world does not exist anywhere outside the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light.”⁹ He also said: “The true aspect invariably manifests in all phenomena, and all phenomena invariably manifest in the ten factors. The ten factors invariably manifest in the Ten Worlds, and the Ten Worlds invariably manifest in life and its environment.”¹⁰

The Lotus Sutra reads, “The true aspect of all phenomena [can only be understood and shared between Buddhas. This reality consists of the appearance, nature . . . and] their consistency from beginning to end.”¹¹ The “Life Span” chapter states, “It has been immeasurable, boundless [hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, millions of nayutas of kalpas] since I in fact attained Buddhahood.” In this passage, “I” refers to all beings in the Ten Worlds. Because all beings of the Ten Worlds are inherently Buddhas, they dwell in the pure land. The “Expedient Means” chapter reads, “These phenomena are part of an abiding Law, [and] the characteristics of the world are constantly abiding.” Since it is the way of the world that birth and death are eternally unchanging charac-

teristics of life in the three existences of past, present, and future, there is no need to grieve or to be surprised. The single word “characteristic” represents the eight characteristics, or phases, of the Buddha’s existence. Even these eight phases do not transcend the two words birth and death. To be enlightened in this way is referred to as the attainment of Buddhahood in one’s present form by the votaries of the Lotus Sutra.

Since your deceased husband was a votary of this sutra, he doubtless attained Buddhahood just as he was. You need not grieve so much over his passing. On the other hand, to grieve is only natural for ordinary people. However, even sages are sometimes sad. Could the lamenting of all the great enlightened disciples of Shakyamuni Buddha at his passing have been meant to show the behavior of ordinary people?

You should by all means perform as much good as you possibly can for the sake of your deceased husband. The words of a wise man of old also teach that “you should base your mind on the ninth consciousness, and carry out your practice in the six consciousnesses.”¹² How reasonable it is too! In this letter I have written my long-cherished teachings. Keep them deep within your heart.

Respectfully,
Nichiren

The eleventh day of the seventh
month

Reply to the wife of the late Ueno



Background

In the fifth month of the eleventh year of Bun’ei (1274), Nichiren Daishonin left Kamakura and went to live in a small dwelling at the foot of Mount

Minobu. In the seventh month, the Daishonin wrote this letter to the wife of Nanjo Hyoe Shichiro, or Ueno. She was the mother of Nanjo Tokimitsu,

who had succeeded his father as steward of Ueno in Suruga Province. She had raised nine children after her husband's death in 1265 and was a devoted mother and a sincere follower of the Daishonin. On this occasion she had

sent the Daishonin various offerings to commemorate the tenth anniversary of her husband's death. This letter expresses the Daishonin's appreciation for her thoughtfulness and devotion.

Notes

1. Lotus Sutra, chap. 11.
2. There are eight hot hells, each with sixteen subsidiary hells. The hell of repeated rebirth for torture is the first of the hot hells. There victims are slashed and pounded with swords and iron staves, whereupon their body immediately regenerates; they thus experience the same suffering repeatedly. The hell of black cords is the second of the hot hells. There the occupants are either sawed in half or slashed with red-hot axes. Suffering there is said to be ten times greater than in the hell of repeated rebirth for torture. Those who have committed the five cardinal sins are said to undergo indescribable torture in the lowest and severest hell, the hell of incessant suffering. The hell of the crimson lotus and the hell of the great crimson lotus are two of the eight cold hells. They are so called because the intense cold there makes one double over until one's back splits open and the bloody flesh blossoms like a crimson lotus flower.
3. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.
4. *Ibid.*, chap. 25. "His name" indicates the name of Bodhisattva Perceiver of the

World's Sounds. The quotation that follows is from chapter 23.

5. *Great Concentration and Insight*. This appears in Chang-an's preface.

6. A rephrasing of a passage in chapter 10 of the Lotus Sutra that reads, "Great pity and compassion are the [Thus Come One's] room . . ."

7. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.

8. *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*.

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

10. *The Diamond Scalpel*.

11. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.

12. The source of this quotation is unknown. Concerning the nine consciousnesses, the first five relate to the five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. The sixth consciousness integrates the perceptions of the first five and renders them into a coherent image. The ninth, or amalā-consciousness, free from all karmic impurity, is the fundamental purifying force that is the Buddha nature. See also nine consciousnesses in Glossary.