

## Reply to Niama



I HAVE received the bag of sea laver that you sent. I would also like to express my appreciation for the offering of sea laver from Oama.

This area is called Mount Minobu. Suruga Province lies to the south, and it is more than a hundred *ri* from the coast at Ukishimagahara<sup>1</sup> in that province to this mountain in the district of Hakiri in Kai Province. The route is more difficult than ten times the distance on an ordinary path. The Fuji River,<sup>2</sup> the swiftest in all Japan, runs from north to south. High mountains rise to the east and west of this river, forming a deep valley where huge rocks stand about everywhere like tall folding-screens. The waters of the river rush through the valley like an arrow shot through a tube by a powerful archer. The river is so swift and rocky that sometimes a boat is smashed to pieces as it travels along the banks or attempts to cross the stream. Coming through this dangerous place, you arrive at a large mountain called the peak of Minobu.

To the east stands the peak of Tenshi; to the south, Takatori; to the west, Shichimen; and to the north, Minobu. It is as though four towering folding-screens had been set up. Climbing these peaks, you see a vast stretch of forest below, while going down to the valleys, you find huge rocks lined up

side by side. The howls of wolves fill the mountains, the chatter of monkeys echoes through the valleys, stags call plaintively to their does, and the cries of cicadas sound shrilly. Here spring flowers bloom in summer, and trees bear autumn fruit in winter. Occasionally you see a woodcutter gathering firewood, and those who visit from time to time are friends of old. Mount Shang where the Four White-Haired Elders retired from the world, and the deep recesses in the mountains where the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove<sup>3</sup> secluded themselves, must have been like this place.

Climbing the peak, it looks as if seaweed were growing there, but instead you find only an expanse of ferns. Going down to the valley, you think surely it must be laver growing there, but it is only a dense growth of parsley.

Though I have long since ceased to think about my home, seeing this laver brings back many familiar memories, and I am saddened and find it hard to bear. It is the same kind of laver I saw long ago on the shore at Kataumi, Ichikawa, and Kominato.<sup>4</sup> I feel an unwarranted resentment that, while the color, shape, and taste of this laver have remained unchanged, my parents have passed away, and I cannot restrain my tears.

But enough of this. I have been asked

to inscribe a Gohonzon for Oama, and I am troubled about it. The reason is as follows. This Gohonzon was never mentioned in the writings of the many Tripitaka masters who traveled from India to China, or in those of the priests who journeyed from China to India. All the objects of devotion ever enshrined in the temples throughout India are described without exception in *The Record of the Western Regions*, *The Biography of the Tripitaka Master of Tā-tz'u-en-ssu Temple*, and *The Transmission of the Lamp*. Nor have I found it mentioned among the objects of devotion of the various temples that were described by those sages who traveled from China to Japan, or by those wise men who went from Japan to China. Since the daily records of countless temples, such as Gango-ji and Shitenno-ji,<sup>5</sup> the first temples in Japan, and many histories, beginning with *The Chronicles of Japan*, name them without omission, the objects of devotion of those temples are clearly known, but a Gohonzon has never been listed among them.

People say in doubt, "It was probably not expounded in the sutras or treatises. That is why the many wise men have neither painted nor carved images of it." However, the sutras are before their very eyes. Those who so doubt should examine whether or not it is found in the sutras. It is wrong to denounce this object of devotion merely because it was never painted or carved in previous ages.

For example, Shakyamuni Buddha once ascended to the heaven of the thirty-three gods to fulfill his obligations to his deceased mother. But because of the Buddha's transcendental powers, with the exception of the Venerable Maudgalyayana, no one in the entire land of Jambudvipa was aware of it. Thus, even though Buddhism is before their very eyes, if people lack the proper capacity, it will not be revealed, and if the time is not right, it will not

spread. This is a principle of nature. It is as if, for instance, the tides of the ocean were ebbing and flowing in accordance with the time, or the moon in the heavens were waning and waxing.

Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, treasured this Gohonzon in his heart for numberless major world system dust particle kalpas, and even after he appeared in this world, he did not expound it until more than forty years after his first preaching. Even in the Lotus Sutra he did not allude to it in the earlier chapters of the theoretical teaching. He began things in the "Treasure Tower" chapter, he revealed it in the "Life Span" chapter, and he brought things to a close in the "Supernatural Powers" and "Entrustment" chapters.

Bodhisattvas such as Manjushri, who lives in the Golden-colored World, Maitreya, in the palace of the Tushita heaven, and Perceiver of the World's Sounds, on Mount Potalaka, and Bodhisattva Medicine King, who is a disciple of the Buddha Sun Moon Pure Bright Virtue, all vied with one another in asking [the Buddha's permission to propagate the Gohonzon in the Latter Day of the Law], but he refused. The Buddha declared: "Those bodhisattvas are known for their excellent wisdom and profound learning, but since they have only recently begun to hear the Lotus Sutra, their understanding is still limited. Thus they would not be able to endure the great difficulties of the latter age. My true disciples I have kept hidden in the depths of the earth for numberless major world system dust particle kalpas. I will entrust it to them." So saying, the Buddha summoned Bodhisattva Superior Practices and the other bodhisattvas in the "Emerging from the Earth" chapter and entrusted them with the five characters of Myoho-renge-kyo, the heart of the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra.

Then the Buddha said: "Listen care-

fully. You must not propagate it in the first millennium of the Former Day of the Law or in the second millennium of the Middle Day following my death. In the beginning of the Latter Day of the Law, slanderous monks will fill the land of Jambudvīpa, so that all the heavenly gods will demonstrate their rage, comets will appear in the sky, and the earth will quake like the movement of huge waves. Innumerable disasters and calamities, such as drought, fires, floods, gales, epidemics, famine, and war, will all occur at once. The people of Jambudvīpa will don armor and take up bows and staves, but since none of the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, or benevolent deities will be able to help them, they will all die and fall like rain into the hell of incessant suffering. At this very time, rulers can save their countries and the people be freed from calamities and in their next life escape the great fires of hell if they embrace and believe in this great mandala of the five characters.”

Though Nichiren is not Bodhisattva Superior Practices, believing that his already having attained a general understanding of this teaching is perhaps the design of that bodhisattva, he has been declaring it for these more than twenty years. When one resolves to propagate it, one will meet difficulties, as the sutra states: “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?”<sup>6</sup> and “It will face much hostility in the world and be difficult to believe.”<sup>7</sup> Of the three powerful enemies predicted in the sutra, the first indicates, in addition to the sovereign, district and village stewards, lords of manors, and the ordinary populace. Believing the charges leveled by the second and third enemies, who are priests, these will curse or vilify the votary of the Lotus Sutra or attack him with swords and staves.

Though it is a remote place, Tojo Village in Awa Province is like the center of Japan because the Sun Goddess resides there. Though in ancient times she lived in Ise Province,<sup>8</sup> when the emperors came to have deep faith in Hachiman and the Kamo shrines,<sup>9</sup> and neglected the Sun Goddess, she became enraged. At that time, Minamoto no Yoritomo, the general of the right, wrote a pledge and ordered Aoka no Kodayu<sup>10</sup> to enshrine her in the outer shrine of Ise. Perhaps because Yoritomo fulfilled the goddess’s wish, he became the shogun who ruled all of Japan. This man then decided on Tojo District as the residence of the Sun Goddess. That may be why this goddess no longer lives in Ise but in Tojo District in Awa Province. This is similar to the case of Great Bodhisattva Hachiman, who, in ancient times, resided at Dazaifu, but later moved to Mount Otokoyama in Yamashiro Province, and now lives at Tsurugaoka in Kamakura, in Sagami Province.<sup>11</sup>

Out of all the places in the entire land of Jambudvīpa, Nichiren began to propagate this correct teaching in Tojo District, in Awa Province, in Japan. Accordingly, the Tojo steward became my enemy, but his clan has now been half destroyed.

Because Oama is insincere and foolish, sometimes she believes, but other times she doubts. She is irresolute. When Nichiren incurred the wrath of the government authorities,<sup>12</sup> she discarded the Lotus Sutra. This is what I meant before, when I told her whenever we met that the Lotus Sutra is “the most difficult to believe and the most difficult to understand.”<sup>13</sup>

If I present her with this Gohonzon for her salvation because I am greatly indebted to her, the ten demon daughters will certainly think I am a very partial priest. On the other hand, if just as the sutra says I do not give it to a person without faith, even if I am not

partial, perhaps, not realizing her own fault, she will harbor a grudge against me. I have explained the reason for my refusal in detail in a letter to Acharya Suke.<sup>14</sup> Please send for the letter and show it to her.

You are of the same family as Oama, but you have demonstrated the sincerity of your faith. Because you have often sent offerings to me, both to the province of Sado and to this province, and because your resolve does not seem to wane, I will give you the Gohonzon. But I still worry whether you will maintain your faith to the end, and feel as if I were treading on thin ice or facing a drawn sword. I will write to you again in more detail.

Even though it is said that not only

Oama regrets, but in Kamakura, among the 999 out of 1,000 people who gave up their faith when I was arrested, perhaps since public feeling has now abated, there are some who regret as well, these could never be like her to me.

Please explain thoroughly that no matter how sorry I feel for her, since flesh is no substitute for bone,<sup>15</sup> I do not intend to grant her request because she has turned against the Lotus Sutra.

With my deep respect,  
Nichiren

The sixteenth day of the second  
month

Reply to Niiama



## Background

This letter was written in the second month of the twelfth year of Bun'ei (1275), the year after Nichiren Daishonin returned from his exile to Sado and retired to Mount Minobu. It was the Daishonin's response to a letter from Niiama and her husband's mother (or possibly, grandmother), Oama, requesting that the Daishonin inscribe a Gohonzon for them. In contrast to Oama (elder nun), the letter's recipient was called Niiama (younger nun).

Oama had been the wife of Hojo Tomotoki, the younger brother of the third regent, Yasutoki. Tomotoki was also the lord of Nagasa District in Awa Province, where the Daishonin was born. Tojo Village, which later itself became a district, was in this area. Niiama is said to have been the wife of either Tomotoki's son or grandson. Both women were widows and lived

together in Tojo. The Daishonin's family was apparently indebted to Oama for some kindness she had extended to them. Once when Tojo Kagenobu, the steward of the same area, put pressure on Oama in an effort to bring Seichoji temple under his control, the Daishonin exerted himself on her behalf in order to repay his obligation and to thwart Kagenobu's attempt.

Soon after the Daishonin proclaimed the correct teaching for the Latter Day of the Law, Oama became his follower. She was not steadfast, however, and abandoned her faith around the time of the Tatsunokuchi Persecution. After the Daishonin situated himself at Minobu, she again changed her mind and asked him to grant her a Gohonzon. He refused, knowing her faith to be unstable. He did, however, bestow a Gohonzon upon Niiama.

## Notes

1. An area in eastern Suruga Province (present-day Shizuoka Prefecture) extending from the southern foot of Mount Ashitaka near Numazu to Suzukawa in Fuji City.

2. A river to the west of Mount Fuji flowing south into Suruga Bay. It is about 140 km long.

3. Shan T'ao, Hsi K'ang, Juan Chi, Juan Hsien, Wang Jung, Hsiang Hsiu, and Liu Ling. At the end of the Wei dynasty (220–265), because the government was corrupt and chaotic, they are said to have retired to a bamboo grove where they pursued the study of the philosophy of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu.

4. Places along the Pacific coast in Awa, the Daishonin's native province.

5. A temple of the Flower Garland school, Gango-ji is one of the seven major temples of Nara. The construction of this temple was begun in 588 by the court official Soga no Umako and was completed in 596. Shitenno-ji is the oldest extant Japanese Buddhist temple. Founded by Prince Shotoku in 587, it is located in what is now Osaka. It is said that Shotoku built it to demonstrate his gratitude for his victory with Soga no Umako over Mononobe no Moriya, and that he enshrined there statues of the four heavenly kings (Jpn shitenno).

6. Lotus Sutra, chap. 10.

7. *Ibid.*, chap. 14.

8. Ise Province is in present-day Mie Prefecture; it is the site of the Grand Shrines of Ise. The inner and outer shrines enshrine

the ancestral gods of the imperial family.

9. Hachiman is a major Shinto deity, adopted by Buddhism as a protective deity. The Kamo shrines are two independent but closely related Shinto shrines in Kyoto.

10. Aoka no Kodayu (n.d.) was the first attendant of the shrine erected in Tojo Village by Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147–1199) to honor the Sun Goddess.

11. The original shrine to Hachiman was near Dazaifu, a local headquarters of the government, in Kyushu. The earliest extant reference to that shrine was recorded in 737. In 859, Iwashimizu Hachiman Shrine was erected on Mount Otokoyama, south of Kyoto. Later, since Hachiman was adopted by the Minamoto family as their patron deity, he was identified with military prowess. Consequently, in 1191, Minamoto no Yoritomo, the founder of the Kamakura government, established Hachiman Shrine at Tsurugaoka in Kamakura.

12. Reference is to the Tatsunokuchi Persecution, an unsuccessful attempt to execute the Daishonin on the twelfth day of the ninth month, 1271.

13. Lotus Sutra, chap. 10.

14. Acharya Suke is believed to have been a follower of the Daishonin and a confidant of the lord of Tojo District. According to another view, he was among the priests of Seicho-ji temple, where the Daishonin had entered the priesthood.

15. The Daishonin may be comparing "flesh" to personal feelings, and "bone" to Buddhist principles.