

The Teaching, Practice, and Proof



DURING the two thousand years of the Former and Middle Days of the Law, those who embraced Hinayana or provisional Mahayana Buddhism as the basis of their faith and practiced these teachings in earnest could generally obtain the benefit of enlightenment. However, though they believed that this benefit had come directly from the sutras on which they had chosen to rely, in light of the Lotus Sutra, no benefit ever originated from any such provisional teachings. The reason [they were able to attain enlightenment] is that all these people had already established a bond with the Lotus Sutra during the lifetime of the Buddha, though the results they gained varied according to whether or not their receptivity had fully matured. Those whose capacity to understand the Lotus Sutra was fully mature attained enlightenment during the lifetime of the Buddha, while those whose capacity was inferior and immature [could not attain enlightenment at that time. But they] reappeared in the Former Day of the Law, and by embracing provisional Mahayana teachings such as the Vimalakirti, Brahma Excellent Thought, Meditation, Benevolent Kings, and Wisdom sutras, they gained the same proof of enlightenment as that obtained by those of higher capacity during the Buddha's lifetime.

Thus the Former Day of the Law

possessed all three: teaching, practice, and proof, whereas in the Middle Day of the Law, there were teaching and practice but no longer any proof. Now in the Latter Day of the Law, only the teaching remains; there is neither practice nor proof. There is no longer a single person who has formed a relationship with Shakyamuni Buddha. Those who possessed the capacity to gain enlightenment through either the provisional or true Mahayana sutras have long since disappeared. In this impure and evil age, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo of the "Life Span" chapter, the heart of the essential teaching, should be planted as the seeds of Buddhahood for the first time in the hearts of all those who commit the five cardinal sins and slander the correct teaching. This is what is indicated in the "Life Span" chapter where it states, "I will leave this good medicine here. You should take it and not worry that it will not cure you."

In the past, in the Middle Day of the Law of the Buddha Awesome Sound King, not a single person knew of the three treasures. However, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging appeared, and to all living beings he declared the teaching of twenty-four characters that the Buddha Awesome Sound King had expounded. All those who heard this twenty-four-character teaching,

without a single exception, were later reborn with Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, and were at last able to obtain the benefit of enlightenment. This was solely because they had already received the seeds of Buddhahood when they first heard the teaching. The same thing occurs in our present era. Bodhisattva Never Disparaging's age was the Middle Day of the Law, whereas this age is the defiled Latter Day of the Law. He was a practitioner at the initial stage of rejoicing, and I, Nichiren, am an ordinary practitioner at the stage of hearing the name and words of the truth. He sowed the seeds of Buddhahood with the twenty-four characters, while I do so with only the five characters [of Myoho-enge-kyo]. Although the ages are different, the process of attaining Buddhahood is exactly the same.¹

Question: You have mentioned above that the teaching, practice, and proof are not all present in each of the three periods of the Former, Middle, and Latter Days of the Law. If so, how do you explain the Great Teacher Miao-lo's statement, "The beginning of the Latter Day of the Law will not be without inconspicuous benefit, for it is the time when the great teaching will be propagated"?²

Answer: The meaning of this passage is that those who obtained benefit during the Former and Middle Days of the Law received "conspicuous" benefit, because the relationship they formed with the Lotus Sutra during the lifetime of the Buddha had finally matured. On the other hand, those born today in the Latter Day of the Law receive the seeds of Buddhahood for the first time, and their benefit is therefore "inconspicuous." The teaching, practice, and proof of this age differ greatly from those of Hinayana, provisional Mahayana, the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings, or the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra. There is no one now who

can gain benefits [like those of the Former and Middle Days of the Law]. According to Miao-lo's commentary, the benefits in the Latter Day are inconspicuous, and people can therefore neither perceive nor understand them.

Question: Is there any sutra passage which says that inconspicuous benefits are limited to the Latter Day of the Law?

Answer: A passage from the "Medicine King" chapter in the seventh volume of the Lotus Sutra reads: "This sutra provides good medicine for the ills of the people of Jambudvīpa. If a person who has an illness is able to hear this sutra, then his illness will be wiped out and he will know neither old age nor death." The Great Teacher Miao-lo says: "To regard the last five-hundred-year period after the Buddha's passing as the time when no one can attain benefit is a superficial viewpoint. The beginning of the Latter Day of the Law will not be without inconspicuous benefit, for it is the time when the great teaching will be propagated. The last five-hundred-year period corresponds to that time."³

Question: The passages you have quoted indicate that the propagation of the Lotus Sutra is limited to the first five hundred years of the Latter Day of the Law. Yet the provisional Mahayana sutras say that their practices will still be appropriate throughout the ten thousand years of the Latter Day of the Law. How do you reply to this?

Answer: The above-mentioned commentary states that such an interpretation of the last five-hundred-year period is "superficial." From a more profound viewpoint, the Lotus Sutra will spread throughout the ten thousand years of the Latter Day. The Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai comments on the previously quoted sutra passage, stating: "It is not only the people who live during the Buddha's lifetime who obtain great benefits. In the last five-hundred-

year period, the mystic way will spread and benefit humankind far into the future.”⁴ Does this annotation suggest anything other than the ten thousand years of the Latter Day of the Law? The “Distinctions in Benefits” chapter in the sixth volume of the Lotus Sutra states, “In the evil age of the Latter Day of the Law if there is someone who can uphold this sutra . . .” Also the “Peaceful Practices” chapter reads, “In the Latter Day of the Law, if one wishes to preach this sutra . . .” These quotations refer to [the propagation of the Lotus Sutra in] the ten thousand years of the Latter Day of the Law. All the Buddha’s teachings other than the Lotus Sutra are covered by his declaration: “In these more than forty years, I have not yet revealed the truth.”⁵ Moreover, there are some cases where the sutras have been revised according to the understanding of those who compiled them and therefore cannot be trusted.

The scholars of the various schools remain oblivious to the fact that the Buddha sowed the seeds of enlightenment when he expounded the Lotus Sutra in the past. How foolish they are! Quite unaware of the distant past, major world system dust particle kalpas ago or numberless major world system dust particle kalpas ago, they abandon the wonderful teaching that is pure and perfect, and sink again into the sea of the sufferings of birth and death. It is pitiful beyond description that, though born in a land where the people’s capacity to receive the perfect teaching is fully mature, they vainly fall back into the great citadel of the hell of incessant suffering. They are no different from a person who arrives at the bejeweled K’un-lun Mountains only to return to his impoverished country without a single gem, or one who enters a forest of sandalwood trees, yet goes back to the shards and rubble of one’s own land without ever plucking the aromatic champaka⁶ blossom. The

third volume of the Lotus Sutra reads, “Suppose that someone coming from a land of famine should suddenly encounter a great king’s feast.”⁷ And the sixth volume reads, “This, my land, remains safe and tranquil . . . My pure land is not destroyed.”⁸

In your letter you mentioned a difficult question put to you as to the assertion that people can partially achieve the way through their practice of the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings. In reply, you should quote the third volume of the Nirvana Sutra that reads, “Good men, study and practice [until you learn that the three treasures are one and eternal].” Further, quote the third volume of *The Annotations on “Great Concentration and Insight”* that comments on this passage where it states, “Only those who have heard the Mahayana teachings in the remote past [can attain the way through practicing the Hinayana teachings],” and “Those who gained the way through the practice of the various sutras expounded before the Lotus were able to do so only because of their initial practice in the remote past.”⁹ Thus you should make clear that the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings provide no benefit of enlightenment whatsoever. Then explain that the same principle holds true in the time of propagation following the Buddha’s passing. All who obtained proof of enlightenment in the Former and Middle Days of the Law did so solely because of the relationship they had formed with the Lotus Sutra during the Buddha’s lifetime.

Should your opponents repeatedly insist that the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings provide a path to enlightenment, cite to them the Buddha’s own declaration in the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra: “In these more than forty years, I have not yet revealed the truth.” Ordinary people like ourselves at the stage of hearing the name and words of the truth can expect to attain Buddhahood by relying on the teachings of the Bud-

dha. The words of the various teachers are in themselves of no use at all. The Buddha gave strict counsel against following them with his statement in the Nirvana Sutra, "Rely on the Law and not upon persons." Remind your opponents of this, and repeatedly cite the passage, "I have not yet revealed the truth," to refute their arguments. However, do not carelessly cite such passages as "Honestly discarding expedient means, [I will preach only the unsurpassed way]"¹⁰ and "The World-Honored One has long expounded his doctrines [and now must reveal the truth]."¹¹ Rather, keep these teachings in your heart, and never quote them without good reason.

Another difficult question you mentioned concerns the assertion that attaining the way indicated in the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings and that of the Lotus Sutra are ultimately the same. This question arises because the Meditation Sutra says that those who rely upon it will be reborn in the Pure Land. In reply, you should say that similar assertions can be found in other sutras, and cite again the teaching, "In these more than forty years, I have not yet revealed the truth," and others, such as "[The Buddha preaches so as an expedient means], merely employing provisional names and terms."¹² If they further contend that the Meditation Sutra and the Lotus Sutra were expounded during the same period of time, you should deal with this by quoting the passage from the "Teacher of the Law" chapter in which the Buddha says, "Among the sutras I have preached, now preach, and will preach, [this Lotus Sutra is the most difficult to believe and the most difficult to understand]." You can also quote relevant passages from the third volume of *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*¹³ or the third volume of *The Annotations on "The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra."*¹⁴ Be sure, however, that you con-

sider these sutras and commentaries well, and do not quote them haphazardly.

In your letter you also mentioned the claims of the True Word school. First, ask upon which scriptural passage the Great Teacher Kobo based his denunciation of the Lotus Sutra as a doctrine of childish theory and of Shakyamuni as being still in the region of darkness. If they reply by citing some sutra, ask them which of the Buddhas of the three existences is represented by the Thus Come One Mahavairochana. Then, ask them if they are aware of the deceit perpetrated by such priests as the Tripitaka masters Shan-wu-wei and Chin-kang-chih. Tell them how Shan-wu-wei deceived the priest I-hsing when he dictated to him his commentary on the Mahavairochana Sutra.¹⁵ Although not the slightest indication of three thousand realms in a single moment of life is to be found in the Mahavairochana Sutra, this false interpretation stating that it is was put forth when the sutra was introduced to China. As regards the most perverted of their distortions, ask them if there is documentary proof in the teachings of any of the Buddhas of the three existences that permits them to tread on the head of Vairochana Buddha.¹⁶ If they retort in some way or other, then tell them about the Great Arrogant Brahman who used statues [of the three deities of Brahmanism¹⁷ and of the Buddha Shakyamuni] as the legs of his preaching platform. On other points, ask them in the same way just which sutra or treatise they can provide as proof of their assertions, and for the rest, debate with them as I have always taught you. No matter which school you may debate, if the teachings of the True Word school are mentioned, clearly refute that school's distorted views.

Next, as to the assertions of the Nem-butso school: The Dharma Teacher

T'an-luan defines the Nembutsu as the easy-to-practice way and the practices of the other schools as the difficult-to-practice way. Tao-ch'ö defines the Nembutsu teachings as the Pure Land teachings and all the other teachings as the Sacred Way teachings. Shan-tao distinguishes between correct and sundry practices, while Honen enjoins people to "discard, close, ignore, and abandon"¹⁸ all sutras other than those relating to Amida's Pure Land. Have those who cite these statements identify the exact sutra or treatise from which they are derived. Of sutras there are of course two types—true and provisional. Treatises can also be divided into two types—those that discuss Hinayana, Mahayana, or Buddhism in general, and those dealing with specific sutras or chapters. Moreover, there are those treatises that are faithful to the sutras and those that distort the sutras. One should clearly master these distinctions. Ask them if, from among the three Pure Land sutras, they can point out any passage verifying the above-mentioned assertions. Everyone chants the Nembutsu and praises Amida Buddha, but ask your opponents as before if there exists any teaching that affords a solid basis for this. In short, let them cite the sutra or treatise on which the adherents of the Nembutsu school in both China and Japan base their denunciation of the Lotus Sutra as a sundry practice, urging people to discard, close, ignore, and abandon it. When they fail to cite any passage that clearly validates these statements, tell them that, just as expounded in the "Simile and Parable" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, the grave offense they commit by slandering the true teaching on the basis of provisional teachings will surely plunge them into the great citadel of the Avichi hell, where they will be reborn again and again for a countless number of kalpas. Let the audience judge for themselves the seriousness of the offense that derives from following

the partial and mistaken doctrines of their school and forsaking the very teaching that all Buddhas of the three existences verified with the words: "All that you [Shakyamuni Buddha] have expounded is the truth!"¹⁹ Could any thinking person fail to discern which is true and which is false? Then, strictly denounce the teachers of their school.

How naive are those who cling only to the stump²⁰ of one sutra without knowing which are superior and which inferior among all the sutras! Even if one cannot [read all the sutras and] discern this for oneself, there can be no mistaking that the Lotus Sutra is the only sutra whose truth was attested to by Shakyamuni Buddha, Many Treasures, and the Buddhas who are Shakyamuni's emanations. Should one nonetheless view the Lotus Sutra as false and misread the Buddha's words "I have not yet revealed the truth" as "I have already revealed the truth," one's distorted vision would be inferior even to that of cattle or sheep. Exactly what is meant by the passage in the "Teacher of the Law" chapter: "Among the sutras I have preached, now preach, and will preach, this Lotus Sutra is the most difficult to believe and the most difficult to understand"? Does the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra not make it clear that Shakyamuni taught the practice of Buddhist austerities spanning myriads of kalpas before declaring, "In these more than forty years, I have not yet revealed the truth"? These passages are nothing less than the Buddha's own statements of the relative superiority of the various sutras he expounded during his some fifty years of teaching. The relative superiority of the sutras corresponds to whether or not they lead to Buddhahood.

Jikaku and Chisho held the view that, although the Lotus Sutra and the Mahavairochana Sutra are equal in terms of principle, the latter is superior in terms of practice. Shan-tao and

Honen maintained that no practice other than the Nembutsu suits the capacity of the people in the Latter Day. The Zen school claims to represent a special transmission apart from the sutras. Their views are as distorted as the eyesight of a person who mistakes east for west, or who cannot tell north from south. Their understanding is inferior to that of cattle or sheep, and their teachings are as ambiguous as a bat [that appears to be neither animal nor bird]. How could they not feel terror at defying the Buddha's words: "Rely on the Law and not upon persons" and "[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]"?²¹ They must have been possessed by evil demons, or become drunk on the bad liquor of inner darkness.

Nothing is more certain than actual proof. Look at the sudden death of Shan-wu-wei and the unexpected disaster that beset I-hsing, or how Kobo and Jikaku died. Could they have met such horrible fates if they were actually votaries of the correct teaching? How do you read the Meditation on the Buddha's Ocean-like Characteristics Sutra²² and other sutras, or Bodhisattva Nagarjuna's treatise²³ that describes the state of death? The Meditation Master I-hsing incorporated Shan-wu-wei's deceptions into his explanation of the Mahavairochana Sutra. Kobo denounced the Lotus Sutra as a doctrine of childish theory. Jikaku contended that the Mahavairochana Sutra was equal to the Lotus Sutra in terms of principle, but superior in terms of practice. T'an-luan and Tao-ch'o proclaimed that the Nembutsu alone suits the people's capacity in the Latter Day. Such views are commonplace in the false teachings of schools founded on provisional sutras. No one would wish to die as these people did. Say these things mildly but

firmly in a quiet voice with a calm gaze and an even expression.

In your letter you asked how to treat questions regarding the degree of benefit afforded by the various sutras other than the Lotus Sutra. First of all, state that the benefit of any of those sutras is incomplete. Then, ask your opponents if any of the sutras upon which their schools are based were confirmed as true and valid by Shakyamuni Buddha, Many Treasures Buddha, and the Buddhas of the ten directions. Say that you have never heard of such, and that Many Treasures and the Buddhas who were Shakyamuni's emanations assembled to testify to the truth of the Lotus Sutra; how could they possibly attest to any other sutra? A Buddha never states two contrary things. Next, ask if there is any other sutra that mentions the six difficult and nine easy acts. Though there may be some among the sutras fabricated by people after the Buddha's passing that do so, there is not a single word or phrase in any other of Shakyamuni Buddha's entire fifty years of teachings that describes them. You should make all this clear.

Do the other sutras reveal that the Buddha originally attained enlightenment numberless major world system dust particle kalpas ago? Do they tell how the people formed a bond with the Lotus Sutra when it was expounded major world system dust particle kalpas ago? What other sutra teaches that one can gain immeasurable benefit by arousing even a single moment of faith in and understanding of it, or that incalculable benefits will accrue even to the fiftieth person who rejoices upon hearing of it? The other sutras do not claim that even the first, second, third, or tenth listener can obtain such great benefit, let alone the fiftieth. Moreover, they do not speak of even one or two dust particle kalpas, let alone such vast reaches of time as numberless major world system dust particle

kalpas or major world system dust particle kalpas. Only through the Lotus Sutra was Buddhahood opened to the people of the two vehicles, and the lowly dragon king's daughter enabled to attain enlightenment in her present form. All the other Mahayana sutras such as the Flower Garland and Wisdom sutras fail to expound these wonders. [T'ien-t'ai made this quite clear when he declared that] the attainment of Buddhahood by persons of the two vehicles was put forth for the first time in the Lotus Sutra. We may be certain that, unlike Kobo or Jikaku, a learned man as enlightened as the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai could not have fabricated any theories that were not based on the words or meaning of the sutras. The Lotus Sutra predicts that the evil Devadatta will attain enlightenment in a land called Heavenly Way, but what other sutra makes such an assertion? Even leaving all such questions aside, what other sutra reveals the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds, or teaches that even plants and trees can attain Buddhahood? T'ien-t'ai explains that [all things having color or fragrance are] manifestations of the Middle Way, and Miao-lo adds that people are shocked and harbor doubts [when they hear for the first time the doctrine that insentient beings possess the Buddha nature].²⁴ Can their interpretations be classed with the distorted views of Jikaku and Chisho, who claim that the Mahavairochana Sutra is equal to the Lotus Sutra in terms of principle, but superior in terms of practice? T'ien-t'ai is one of the teachers who kept the torch of Buddhism burning as it passed through India and China to Japan. He is the sage who gained an awakening at P'u-hsien Monastery;²⁵ he is also the reincarnation of a bodhisattva and attained enlightenment by means of his inherent wisdom. How could he possibly have formulated any interpretations not based on the sutras or treatises?

Is any single great matter to be found in the other sutras? The Lotus Sutra contains twenty outstanding principles. Among those twenty, the most vital is the "Life Span" chapter's revelation that the Buddha first attained enlightenment numberless major world system dust particle kalpas ago. People may well wonder what this revelation means. Explain that it teaches that common people like ourselves, who have been submerged in the sufferings of birth and death since time without beginning and who never so much as dreamed of reaching the shore of enlightenment, become the Thus Come Ones who are originally enlightened and endowed with the three bodies. That is, it reveals the ultimate principle of three thousand realms in a single moment of life. From this perspective, you should firmly establish that the Lotus Sutra is the most profound among all the Buddha's teachings.

You may bring forth this point in an official debate, but not during personal discussions. Should you indiscriminately mention it to whomever you meet, on any occasion or at any time, you will certainly incur punishment from the Buddhas of the three existences. This is the doctrine that I have always referred to as my own inner realization.

Can even the slightest indication of this doctrine be found in the Mahavairochana Sutra? The three Pure Land sutras state that about ten kalpas have passed since Amida Buddha attained enlightenment. Can this possibly compare with the Lotus Sutra's revelation above? Meet each argument with rebuttals such as these, citing each quotation in its proper context. Then tell your opponents to stop and consider this: It is precisely because the Lotus Sutra is so remarkably sublime that Many Treasures came from far away to testify to its truth, and that the emanation Buddhas assembled to join him. Then Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and

all the other Buddhas attested that the sutra is free from falsehood, extending their tongues all the way to the Brahma heaven.²⁶ Bodhisattvas as numerous as the dust particles of a thousand worlds appeared from beneath the earth and were specifically entrusted with the transmission of Myoho-enge-kyo to all living beings throughout the land of Jambudvīpa in this impure and evil latter age. Was it not precisely because these bodhisattvas were the Buddha's envoys that he denied all of the eight hundred thousand million nayutas of great bodhisattvas, saying, "Leave off, good men!"²⁷ If, as is the way with the adherents of misleading schools, they demand that you cite documentary evidence for these statements, quote the "Emerging from the Earth" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, and the ninth volume of *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra* and the ninth volume of *The Annotations on "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra,"* which clarify the three reasons for the rejection of the bodhisattvas from other worlds²⁸ and the three reasons for the emergence of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth.²⁹ Herein lies the matter of utmost importance for Nichiren and his followers.

Adherents of the various schools may attempt to attack you by citing the passage from *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* that states, "If one denounces the teachings others follow out of love for one's own, then even if one is the practitioner who observes the precepts, one will never escape the pains of hell." Ask them whether they know why Nagarjuna wrote this admonition, and if Nagarjuna could possibly have been ignorant of how serious an offense it is to slander the true teaching by clinging to provisional teachings. He stated, "The various sutras are not secret teachings; only the Lotus Sutra is secret."³⁰ He declared that the Lotus Sutra alone is the seed of

enlightenment, likening it to a great physician who can change poison into medicine. Is it possible that he later regretted having said these things, and therefore wrote that, if one denounces the teachings others follow out of love for one's own, one will be destined to fall into the evil paths? If so, he would have been directly contradicting the truthful words of the Lotus Sutra, in which the Buddha states, "Honestly discarding expedient means" and "Not accepting a single verse of the other sutras."³¹ This is hardly conceivable. Nagarjuna was a bodhisattva who appeared in accordance with Shakyamuni Buddha's prediction, as well as a scholar in the direct lineage of the Buddha's teaching. He may well have written this admonition in his treatise because he foresaw that such priests as Kobo and T'an-luan would slander the Lotus Sutra, the teaching that befits this age of the Latter Day of the Law. You should scoff at your opponents for not knowing the meaning of the words they cite. Tell them: "Are you yourselves not followers of those destined to fall into the evil paths? How pitiful! Are you not to be counted among those who will suffer for countless kalpas to come?"

In his appeal to the lord of Hoko-ji,³² Ryokan of the Precepts school stated as follows: "Of late I, Ninsho, have been most vexed by the priest called Nichiren who proclaims that those observing the precepts are destined to fall into hell. What sutra or treatise states such a thing? This is the first question. Moreover, though there is scarcely anyone in Japan today, whether of high or low rank, who does not chant the Nembutsu, he asserts that the Nembutsu forms the karmic cause for falling into the hell of incessant suffering. On what sutra is this based? I would like to ask Nichiren what reliable proof he has to justify this statement. This is the second question."

He sent the government six such questions concerning in general whether or not enlightenment can be achieved through the practice of the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings. If Ryokan of Gokuraku-ji again lets it be known, as he claimed in his appeal, that he desires to meet and debate with me, submit a petition to the government [requesting a public debate]. Say to Ryokan: "My teacher Nichiren incurred the wrath of the government and was exiled to the province of Sado in the eighth year of Bun'ei (1271). In the first month of the eleventh year of Bun'ei,³³ he was pardoned and returned to Kamakura. On his return he remonstrated with Hei no Saemon about various matters and then secluded himself deep in the mountains of Kai Province. He has stated that, even if he were to be summoned by the emperor or empress, he will never emerge from the mountains to debate his teachings with the scholars of other schools. Therefore, although I, his disciple, am a mere novice and my knowledge of his teachings amounts to less than a hair from the hides of nine head of cattle, if anyone comes forth to state their doubts about the Lotus Sutra, I will do my best to reply to them." Then, explain my teachings in direct response to your opponent's questions.

Moreover, when you must reply to the six difficult questions posed in Ryokan's appeal, bear in mind, as I have always said, that Nichiren's disciples cannot accomplish anything if they are cowardly. As you debate the relative superiority and depth of the Lotus Sutra and other sutras, and whether or not they lead to enlightenment, remember that even the Shakyamuni Buddha described in the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings or in the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra is no one to be in awe of; even less so are bodhisattvas at the stage of near-perfect enlightenment. Followers of schools based on the provisional teachings are of still less account. As

you debate, bear in mind that because we embrace the Lotus Sutra our position is like that of the great heavenly king Brahma, and it is not at all wrong to regard those who hold to lesser teachings as our subjects or even as barbarians.

The adherents of the Precepts school do violence to the precepts that exceeds even the devastation of a crumbling mountain or a flooding river. Far from attaining Buddhahood, they will not even be reborn in the world of human or heavenly beings. The Great Teacher Miao-lo states, "If one observes but a single precept, one will be born as a human being. But if one breaks even a single precept, one will instead fall into the three evil paths."³⁴ Who among Ninsho's followers in the Precepts school embraces even one of the prohibitions set forth in the Observance of the Precepts Sutra, the Meditation on the Correct Teaching Sutra, and other sutras, or truly observes the rules of discipline expounded in the Hinayana and Mahayana sutras, such as the Agama? Without doubt they are all destined to "fall into the three evil paths," or even sink into the hell of incessant suffering. How pitiful they are! You should tell them so and reproach them by citing the "Treasure Tower" chapter's explanation of what "observing the precepts and practicing [the rules of discipline]"³⁵ truly means. Then, pausing briefly, tell them that the five characters of Myohorenge-kyo, the heart of the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra, contain the benefit amassed through the countless practices and meritorious deeds of all Buddhas throughout the three existences. Then, how can these five characters not include the benefits obtained by observing all of the Buddhas' precepts? Once the practitioner embraces this perfectly endowed wonderful precept, he cannot break it, even if he should try. It is therefore called the precept of the diamond chalice.³⁶ Only by

observing this wonderful precept have the Buddhas of the three existences become Buddhas endowed with the three bodies—the Dharma body, the reward body, and the manifested body, which are each without beginning or end. The Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai wrote of this, "In the various teachings, he [the Buddha] kept this secret and did not transmit it."³⁷ Now in the Latter Day of the Law, any person—whether wise or ignorant, priest or lay believer, or of high or low position—who embraces Myoho-enge-kyo and practices it in accordance with the Buddha's teaching, cannot fail to gain the fruit of Buddhahood. For precisely this reason, in reference to the votary of the Lotus Sutra in the impure and evil age after the Buddha's passing, the sutra declares, "Such a person assuredly and without doubt will attain the Buddha way."³⁸ On the other hand, those who practice the provisional teachings against the admonition of Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and the Buddhas of the ten directions will definitely fall into the hell of incessant suffering. Now that so wondrous a precept has been revealed, none of the precepts expounded in the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings or in the theoretical teaching have the slightest power to benefit people. Since they provide not the slightest benefit, it is totally useless to observe them, even for a single day.

At the time when the wonderful precept of the essential teaching is to spread, there will doubtless be omens never witnessed in any previous age. The great earthquake of the Shoka era and the huge comet of the Bun'ei era³⁹ were two such signs. But who among our contemporaries, what school of Buddhism, is actually propagating the object of devotion and the sanctuary of the essential teaching? Not a single person carried out this task during the 2,220 years and more following the Buddha's passing. Now, more than 700 years after Buddhism was introduced

to Japan in the reign of the thirtieth emperor Kimmei, the great Law never heard of in previous ages is spreading throughout Japan. How reassuring it is to know that not only the people here, but those of India, China, and the entire land of Jambudvīpa will be able to attain Buddhahood!

Concerning the teaching, practice, and proof that I stressed earlier, [with regard to this great Law] the Latter Day of the Law possesses all three, just as the Former Day of the Law did with regard to Shakyamuni's teaching. Superior Practices, the leader of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, has already made his advent in this world, so the great Law, the essence of the Lotus Sutra that was entrusted to him, will spread without fail. For all the living beings of Japan, China, and the other countries of the world, it will be an event as rare as seeing the udumbara flower blossom to herald the advent of a gold-wheel-turning king. In the first forty-two years of his preaching life, as well as in the fourteen chapters of the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha kept this great Law secret and did not teach it, expounding it only in the revelation portion of the essential teaching.⁴⁰

I have heard that, when the priest Ryokan knew I was far away in a distant province, he told everyone how he wished I would hasten to Kamakura so that he might debate with me and dispel the people's doubts. Demand to know if praising oneself and disparaging others⁴¹ in this fashion is one of the precepts his school practices. What is more, when I actually did return to Kamakura, Ryokan shut his gates and forbade anyone to enter. At times, he even feigned illness, saying that he had caught a cold. Tell him, "I am not Nichiren but merely one of his disciples. Though I speak with a bit of an accent and am rather dull-witted, I fully agree with his assertion that the

Precepts school is traitorous.” When in public debate, although the teachings that you advocate are perfectly consistent with the truth, you should never on that account be impolite or abusive, or display a concealed attitude. Such conduct would be disgraceful. Order your thoughts, words, and actions care-

fully, and be prudent when you meet with others in debate.

Nichiren

The twenty-first day of the third month

Sent to Acharya Sammi.



Background

In the fifth month, 1274, Nichiren Daishonin left Kamakura and went to live in a small dwelling in the wilderness of Mount Minobu. Here he continued to write letters and other documents, trained his disciples, and lectured on the Lotus Sutra. From this time, his disciples, centering around Nikko Shonin, took the leadership in propagation activities.

This letter is generally thought to have been written at Minobu in the third month of the twelfth year of Bun’ei (1275). It contains the Daishonin’s reply to questions from Sammi-bo, one of the Daishonin’s leading disciples, concerning his preparations for a religious debate.

Sammi-bo was noted for his eloquence and learning. He was a priest who had studied on Mount Hiei, delivered lectures for the aristocracy in Kyoto, and was for a while active in helping spread the Daishonin’s teachings. The Daishonin, however, chided him on several occasions for his arrogance. During the Atsuhara Persecution of 1279, he forsook his faith and is said to have met a tragic death, although the precise details are not known.

In this letter, Nichiren Daishonin states that Shakyamuni’s teachings no longer lead to enlightenment in the Latter Day of the Law, and that only Nam-myoho-enge-kyo combines the three elements of teaching, practice,

and proof essential to making Buddhism viable. In the opening section, he discusses the Buddha’s teaching, the practice of the teaching, and the proof, that is, the merit—strictly speaking, enlightenment—resulting from practice in the three consecutive periods of the Former, Middle, and Latter Days of the Law. In terms of Hinayana Buddhism, he explains that in the Former Day there are teaching, practice, and proof; in the Middle Day there are teaching and practice but no longer any proof; and in the Latter Day only the teaching remains, and there is neither practice nor proof.

The Daishonin goes on to say that those who attained Buddhahood during Shakyamuni’s lifetime and in the Former and Middle Days of the Law were able to do so because they had already received the seeds of Buddhahood from Shakyamuni in the past and nurtured it over many lifetimes until their capacity for enlightenment had all but matured. For this reason, they were able to gain conspicuous benefit through Shakyamuni’s teachings—that is, they attained enlightenment immediately. In the Latter Day, however, people receive the seeds of Buddhahood for the first time. Because the seeds require a certain period of time to mature, the enlightenment of these people takes a while to become apparent and is therefore called inconspicuous benefit.

Next, asserting the supremacy of the Lotus Sutra, the Daishonin points out the doctrinal errors of the True Word, Nembutsu, and other schools, and urges Sammi-bo to refute their misconcep-

tions fearlessly. Lastly, he stresses the benefit of Myoho-enge-kyo, the core of the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra, and predicts that that teaching will spread widely without fail.

Notes

1. That is, in both Bodhisattva Never Disparaging's time and Nichiren Daishonin's, people hear and slander the correct teaching, but they are eventually able to attain Buddhahood by virtue of the bond they have thereby formed with it.

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

3. *Ibid.*

4. *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra.*

5. Immeasurable Meanings Sutra.

6. A large tree with leaves about twenty centimeters long and golden blossoms whose aroma can be smelled from a distance.

7. Lotus Sutra, chap. 6.

8. *Ibid.*, chap. 16.

9. A rephrasing of a passage in *The Annotations on "Great Concentration and Insight."*

10. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra* reads, "Whether one rejects or accepts [the Buddha's teachings], one should in all cases do so from the standpoint of the Lotus Sutra."

14. *The Annotations on "The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra"* reads, "In evaluating the Buddhist sutras, one should judge on the basis of the Lotus Sutra whether to reject or accept them, because the Lotus Sutra is the single source from which all the other teachings come and to which they return."

15. In his compilation of Shan-wu-wei's commentaries on the Mahavairochana Sutra, I-hsing made it appear as if core doctrines of the T'ien-t'ai school, such as the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, were part of the True Word teachings. Nichiren Daishonin explains the deception referred to here in more detail in *The Selection of the Time* (pp. 564-65).

16. This refers apparently to the initia-

tion rituals conducted in esoteric Buddhism in which candidates toss flowers on a mandala depicting various Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other figures to determine with which figure they have a special relationship. It appears that, as part of the ritual, priests trod on the images. Here Vairochana Buddha refers to Shakyamuni Buddha.

17. The three deities of Brahmanism are Maheshvara, Vasudeva, and Narayana. Maheshvara was said to be a god who reigns over the major world system.

18. Honen does not use these words in this particular form, however. Nichiren Daishonin took these words from *The Nembutsu Chosen above All* and put them together as a set.

19. Lotus Sutra, chap. 11. In the sutra, these words are actually spoken by the Buddha Many Treasures. However, because all Buddhas do in fact verify the Lotus Sutra in the "Supernatural Powers" chapter, the Daishonin attributes this statement to all the Buddhas.

20. Reference is to a story in *Han Fei Tzu* in which a farmer, planting his field, saw a rabbit run into a stump and break its neck. He abandoned his farming and stood guard by the stump, expecting to catch other rabbits. Here the Daishonin uses the "stump" to signify attachment to the provisional teachings without being able to distinguish between superior and inferior sutras.

21. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.

22. There is no extant sutra by this name. It may refer to the Meditation on the Buddha Sutra, which tells of a monk who fell into the Avichi hell for confusing correct and incorrect teachings.

23. *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, which reads in part, "One whose countenance turns dark at the moment of death will fall into hell."

24. Miao-lo in his *On "Great Concentration and Insight"* underscores T'ien-t'ai's

statement about the enlightenment of insentient beings by adding that this will shock and cause doubts.

25. The monastery on Mount Ta-su where T'ien-t'ai studied the threefold Lotus Sutra. As a result of intense practice, he is said to have attained an awakening through the "Medicine King" chapter of the sutra. For this reason, he was regarded as a reincarnation of Bodhisattva Medicine King.

26. This is described in chapter 21 of the Lotus Sutra.

27. Lotus Sutra, chap. 15.

28. First, bodhisattvas from other worlds have their own tasks to fulfill in their respective worlds. Second, they have little connection with the people in the saha world. Third, if Shakyamuni had allowed them to carry out the mission of propagation, he would have had no reason to summon the bodhisattvas of the essential teaching.

29. First, the Bodhisattvas of the Earth are the Buddha's original disciples. Second, they have a deep relationship with the people of the saha world. Third, by summoning and entrusting them with the propagation of his teachings, Shakyamuni was able to verify his enlightenment that had been achieved in the remote past.

30. A rephrasing of a passage in *Great Perfection of Wisdom*.

31. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.

32. The lord of Hoko-ji is another name for Hojo Tokimune (1251-1284), the eighth regent of the Kamakura government.

33. In actuality, the Daishonin returned to Kamakura in the third month, 1274.

34. On "*Great Concentration and Insight*."

35. A passage in the "Treasure Tower" chapter reads: "This sutra is hard to uphold; if one can uphold it even for a short while I will surely rejoice and so will the other Buddhas. A person who can do this wins the admiration of the Buddhas. . . . This is what is called observing the precepts and practicing the rules of discipline."

36. The precept of the diamond chalice is the precept that is impossible to break, like the diamond chalice. It is mentioned in the Brahma Net Sutra, and Dengyo interprets the Buddha nature or the true aspect of all phenomena as the diamond chalice; this precept thus means to embrace the Lotus Sutra. In Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, it means to embrace the Gohonzon.

37. *Words and Phrases*. This is the portion in which T'ien-t'ai comments on the words "the Thus Come One's secret and his transcendental powers" in chapter 16 of the Lotus Sutra.

38. Lotus Sutra, chap. 21.

39. Reference is to the great earthquake that devastated the Kamakura area in the eighth month of 1257 and the huge comet that appeared in the seventh month of 1264.

40. The revelation portion of the essential teaching consists of the second half of the "Emerging from the Earth" chapter, the entire "Life Span" chapter, and the first half of the "Distinctions in Benefits" chapter of the Lotus Sutra. Here it refers specifically to the "Life Span" chapter.

41. A reference to one of the ten major precepts among the fifty-eight rules of discipline for Mahayana bodhisattvas set forth in the Brahma Net Sutra, which is not to praise oneself or disparage others.