

## Letter to the Lay Priest Ichinosawa



IN the first year of the Kocho era (1261), cyclical sign *kanoto-tori*, on the twelfth day of the fifth month, I incurred the wrath of the government authorities and was exiled to the village of Ito in the province of Izu. It is the place where Hyoe-no-suke Yoritomo<sup>1</sup> was banished. Before long, however, in the third year of the Kocho era, cyclical sign *mizunoto-i*, on the twenty-second day of the second month, I was pardoned and allowed to return to Kamakura.

Then, in the eighth year of the Bun'ei era (1271), cyclical sign *kanoto-hitsuji*, on the twelfth day of the ninth month, I once more incurred the wrath of the government and was on the point of having my head cut off. But because of certain circumstances, the execution was postponed. Instead, I was placed in the custody of the former governor of Musashi,<sup>2</sup> who held the island province of Sado in the north as part of his feudal domain. I was sent to that island under the escort of his retainers.

The inhabitants of the island are a wild and barbarous lot, with no understanding of the law of cause and effect. Their treatment of me was indescribably rough. Nevertheless, I did not harbor the slightest resentment against them. The reason is this: Even the ruler of the country of Japan, the lord

of Sagami, whom one would expect to have at least some understanding of principles, failed to investigate the circumstances of my case, though I was in fact attempting to aid the nation. Instead, contrary to all reason and justice, he had me condemned to death. Therefore, even the good men among his subjects were not to be counted upon, and so there was surely no point in hating the bad ones.

Since the time I began declaring this teaching, I have resolved to dedicate my life to the Lotus Sutra and to spread my name in the pure lands of the Buddhas in the ten directions. Hung Yen took the liver of his dead lord, Duke Yi of Wei, cut open his own stomach, and inserted the liver before he died. Yü Jang, because his lord, Chih Po, had suffered disgrace, fell on his sword to avenge the wrong. These men went to such lengths to repay what was no more than a worldly debt of gratitude. The reason why people continue to transmigrate through the six paths for countless kalpas without ever being able to attain Buddhahood is because they begrudge their bodies and do not lay down their lives for the sake of the Lotus Sutra.

The bodhisattva called Gladly Seen for a period of twelve hundred years burned his own body as an offering to the Buddha Sun Moon Pure Bright

Virtue, and for seventy-two thousand years he burned his arms as an offering to the Lotus Sutra, after which he was reborn as Bodhisattva Medicine King. Bodhisattva Never Disparaging suffered abuse and ridicule and was attacked with sticks of wood or tiles and stones over a period of many kalpas, all for the sake of the Lotus Sutra. But was he not reborn as Shakyamuni Buddha? Thus we can see that the path to Buddhahood requires different forms of practice depending upon the age.

In our present day, the Lotus Sutra is of course supreme, as it was in the past. And yet, because the way of practicing it differs from age to age, in this era, even if one were to retire to the mountain forests and read and recite it, or live in the villages and expound its doctrines, or observe all the various precepts, or even burn one's arms as an offering, that person would nevertheless fail to attain Buddhahood.

It would seem as though the teachings of Buddhism are now flourishing in Japan. And yet there is something strange about these teachings, though people are unaware of it. They are like insects that unwittingly fly into a flame, or birds that enter the mouth of a serpent.

The teachers of the True Word school and the adherents of the Flower Garland, Dharma Characteristics, Three Treatises, Zen, Pure Land, and Precepts schools all believe that they have grasped the Law and freed themselves from the sufferings of birth and death. But the founders of these schools failed to discern the true meaning of the sutras upon which they based their teachings. They proceeded only in a shallow manner, employing the sutras in a way that fitted with their own ideas. In doing so, they went against the Lotus Sutra, which means that their teachings were not in accord with the true intention of the Buddha. They were unaware of this, however,

and as they proceeded to propagate their doctrines, both the rulers of the nation and the common people came to believe in them. In addition, these doctrines spread to other countries, and many years have since passed. As a result, the scholars of this latter age, unaware that the founders of these schools were in error, look up to those who practice and propagate their teachings as persons of wisdom.

If the source is muddy, the stream will not flow clear; if the body is bent, the shadow will not be straight. Shan-wu-wei and the others who founded the True Word school were already destined for hell. Perhaps among them some repented in time and hence managed to avoid falling into hell. Or perhaps some merely propagated the teachings of their own sutras and neither praised [nor attacked] the Lotus Sutra, and thus, though unable to free themselves from the sufferings of birth and death, could nevertheless avoid falling into the evil paths. But the people of this latter age are not aware of these matters, and instead all alike put their faith in these teachings. They are like people who board a damaged ship and set out upon the great sea, or like those who, drunk with sake, lie down to sleep in the midst of a fire.

When I perceived this state of affairs, I immediately aroused the aspiration for enlightenment [in order to save them] and began to declare my teaching. I was aware from the beginning that, no matter how I addressed them, the people of the time would probably not believe me, and that I would likely on the contrary be sentenced to exile or execution.

The nation of Japan today has turned its back on the Lotus Sutra and cast aside Shakyamuni Buddha. For that reason, not only are its people bound to fall into the great citadel of the hell of incessant suffering in their next existence, but they will surely

encounter great troubles in their present existence as well. That is to say, invaders will come from a foreign land, and everyone, from the ruler on down to the common people, will lament with a single voice.

To illustrate, if a thousand brothers join together to slay their parent, the burden of guilt will not be divided among them in a thousand portions. Rather each and every one of the brothers must [receive the full karmic retribution, and all alike will] fall into the great citadel of the hell of incessant suffering, to remain there for the space of a kalpa. And the same is true of the people of this country.

Since numberless major world system dust particle kalpas ago, this saha world has been the domain of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings. Of the vast earth, the skies, the mountains and seas, the plants and trees, there is not a single portion that belongs to any other Buddha. And all the living beings within it are likewise the children of Shakyamuni Buddha.

For example, it is said that at the beginning of a kalpa of formation one of the Brahma kings descended from the heavens and gave birth to the various beings who inhabit the six paths.<sup>3</sup> Just as Brahma is then the parent of all those beings, in the same way Shakyamuni Buddha is parent to all living beings in this world. Shakyamuni is the enlightened teacher for all the living beings in this country of ours as well. It is thanks to our teacher that we can know who our parents are; it is owing to Shakyamuni Buddha that we can distinguish black from white.

Yet, following the words of men like Shan-tao and Honen, who have been possessed by the heavenly devil, people proceed to build Amida halls throughout the country. They build Amida halls in each district, each village, and each hamlet. Ordinary citizens build Amida halls in their own houses, and

people make painted or wooden images of Amida Buddha to put up in their homes and dwellings. The name of Amida is on everyone's lips, some chanting it in a loud voice, some chanting it ten thousand times, some chanting it sixty thousand times a day. And persons with a degree of wisdom make haste to encourage others in these practices. This is like adding dried grass to a fire, or loosing winds to blow upon and stir up the waters.

Of the inhabitants of this country, there is not one who is not a disciple and subject of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings. If a person does not paint or carve a single image of Amida or of any Buddha other than Shakyamuni, or does not chant Amida's name, then, although he may be an evil person, he still has not clearly shown that he has rejected Shakyamuni Buddha. But all those people who worship Amida Buddha exclusively have already clearly shown that they have rejected Shakyamuni Buddha. Those who chant the futile formula of the Nembutsu—they are the truly evil ones.

They treat this Buddha who is neither father nor mother, neither sovereign nor teacher to them with the kind of tenderness one might show to a beloved wife. At the same time, they cast aside Shakyamuni Buddha, our real sovereign, parent, and enlightened teacher, and fail to open their mouths to recite the Lotus Sutra, which is like a wet nurse to us all. How can they be called anything but unfilial?

These unfilial persons number not just one or two, a hundred or a thousand; they include not just the inhabitants of one or two provinces. From the ruler on down to the common people, everyone in the entire land of Japan, without a single exception, is guilty of committing the three cardinal sins!<sup>4</sup>

As a result, the sun and moon change color and glare down on them,

the earth shakes and heaves in anger, great comets fill the sky, and huge fires break out all over the land. Yet these persons fail to perceive their error and instead praise themselves, saying, "We unceasingly recite the Nembutsu, and in addition we build Amida halls and pay honor to Amida Buddha!"

Such actions may seem wise, but in fact they are worthless. Suppose there is a young couple. The husband is so in love with his wife, and the wife thinks so tenderly of her husband, that they completely forget about their parents. As a result, the parents go about in thin clothing, while the bedroom of the young couple is warm and snug. The parents have nothing to eat, while the young couple's stomachs are full. Such young people are committing the worst kind of unfilial conduct, and yet they fail to see that they are doing wrong. A wife who would deliberately turn her back on her own mother and a husband who would go against his own father—are they not guilty of an even graver offense?

Amida Buddha dwells in a land that is located a hundred thousand million worlds away and has not the slightest connection with this saha world. However one may claim [that such a connection exists], there is no basis for it. It is like trying to mate a horse with an ox, or a monkey with a dog.

I, Nichiren, am the only person who is aware of this. If I should begrudge my life and thus refrain from speaking out, not only would I be failing to repay the debt of gratitude I owe to my country, but I would also be acting as an enemy of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings. On the other hand, I knew from the outset that, if I set aside my fears and declared things exactly as they are, I would be sentenced to death. And even if I should escape the death penalty, I would surely be condemned to exile. So great is the debt of gratitude I owe

the Buddha, however, that I have not let others intimidate me, but have spoken out.

Just as I anticipated, I was exiled no less than twice. During the second of these sentences, in the summer of the ninth year of the Bun'ei era (1272), I was sent to a place called Ichinosawa in Ishida Village in the province of Sado. The headman and his men in the region to which I had been assigned, in both official and unofficial matters, treated me with greater malice than if I had been a lifelong enemy of their parents or a foe from some previous existence. But the lay priest of the lodgings<sup>5</sup> where I was put up, as well as his wife and servants, though they seemed fearful at first, privately came to look on me with pity, perhaps because of some bond formed between us in a previous existence.

The rations of food that I received from the headman were very scanty. And since I had a number of disciples with me, we often had no more than two or three mouthfuls of rice to a person. Sometimes we portioned out the food on square trays made of bark, and sometimes we simply received it in the palms of our hands and ate it then and there. The master of the house in private treated us with compassion. Though outwardly he appeared to be fearful of the authorities, at heart he had great pity for us, something that I will never forget in any future lifetime. At that time, he meant more to me than the very parents who gave me birth. However great the obligations I incurred to him, I must endeavor to repay them. Even more, I must not fail to do what I had promised him.

The lay priest felt deeply concerned about the life to come and had for a long time devoted himself to chanting the Nembutsu. Moreover, he had constructed an Amida hall and dedicated his lands in offering to Amida Buddha. He was also afraid of how the steward

of the area<sup>6</sup> might react, and so he did not come forward and take faith in the Lotus Sutra. From his point of view, this was probably the most reasonable course to take. But at the same time, he will without doubt fall into the great citadel of the hell of incessant suffering. I had thought, for example, that, even if I were to send him a copy of the Lotus Sutra, he would not be willing to abandon the practice of the Nembutsu out of his fear of worldly opinion, and so it would be like combining water with fire. There was no doubt that the flood of his slander of the Law would extinguish the small flame of his faith in the Lotus Sutra. And if he were to fall into hell, I, Nichiren, would in turn be to blame. Thus, while asking myself anxiously again and again what ought to be done, I have so far not sent him a copy of the Lotus Sutra.

In the midst of all this, I received word that the copy of the Lotus Sutra that I had earlier intended to send him had been destroyed in a fire in Kamakura. More than ever it seemed as though the lay priest had no connection with the Lotus Sutra, and I wondered at myself for ever having promised to send him a copy.

Moreover, when the nun of Kamakura<sup>7</sup> was leaving Sado to return home, she found herself in difficulty for money to cover her journey. I reluctantly asked the lay priest to provide for her expenses, though I regret having made such a request. I could of course simply return the sum of money to him along with interest. But my disciples point out that I would still be failing to keep my original promise. I am faced with difficulties any way I turn, and yet I am afraid that people may think I am given to irresponsible and deceitful behavior. Therefore, I feel I have no choice but to send a copy of the entire Lotus Sutra in ten volumes. Since the lay priest's grandmother seems at heart to

be more deeply drawn to the sutra than does the lay priest himself, I entrust it to you for her sake.

The things I say sound like the words of a fool, and so no one heeds them. Nevertheless, I must note that in the tenth month of the eleventh year of the Bun'ei era (1274), cyclical sign *kinoe-inu*, when the kingdom of the Mongols launched an attack on Tsukushi, the defenders of the island of Tsushima held fast, but So Soma-no-jo,<sup>8</sup> the deputy constable of Tsushima, fled. As a result, the Mongols were able to attack the commoners, killing or taking prisoners among the men, and herding the women together and passing ropes through holes in their hands to tie them to their ships or taking them prisoner. Not a single person escaped.

In the attack on the island of Iki the same thing happened. When the Mongol ships pressed on [to Tsukushi], the lay-priest magistrate<sup>9</sup> who was in charge of the area, the former governor of Buzen, fled in defeat. Several hundred of the Maturato men<sup>10</sup> were struck down or taken prisoner, and the population of one coastal village after another suffered the same fate as the people of Iki and Tsushima.

When the Mongols attack the next time, what will it be like? When thousands and millions of fighting men from their country come swarming and pressing upon Japan, what will happen?

Their forces in the north will first of all attack the island of Sado. In no time at all, they will kill the stewards and constable of the area. When the common people attempt to flee to the northern mountains, they will be killed or taken prisoner or will perish in the mountains.

We must stop to consider why such terrible things should occur. The reason, as I stated earlier, is that every single person in this country has committed the three cardinal sins. Therefore, Brahma, Shakra, the gods of the sun

and moon, and the four heavenly kings have entered into the body of the Mongol ruler and are causing him to chastise our nation.

I may be a fool, but, having declared myself to be the envoy of Shakyamuni Buddha and the votary of the Lotus Sutra, it is nothing short of amazing that my words go unheeded. Because of this failure, the nation now faces ruin. Not only are my words not heeded, but I have been driven out of province after province, been dragged about, attacked and beaten, and sent into exile, and my disciples have been killed or had their fiefs taken away from them.

If someone were to mete out such treatment to an actual messenger of his parents, could that person's actions possibly be condoned? Yet I, Nichiren, am father and mother to all the people of Japan, I am their sovereign, I am their enlightened teacher! Should they turn against one like me? It is absolutely certain that those who chant the Nembutsu are destined to fall into the hell of incessant suffering. You may depend on my words!

When the Mongols come to make their assault, what will you do? Even if you should put this copy of the Lotus Sutra on your head or hang it around your neck and flee to the northern

mountains, the fact remains that over a period of many years you have given support to the Nembutsu priests and have recited the Nembutsu yourself, and in doing so, have made yourself an enemy of Shakyamuni Buddha and of the Lotus Sutra.

If at that time you should lose your life, you must bear no resentment toward the Lotus Sutra. When you are brought before King Yama in his palace, what will you say? At that time, though you may feel foolish in doing so, you will probably declare that you are a lay supporter of Nichiren.

But enough of that. As for this copy of the Lotus Sutra that I am sending, you should ask Gakujo-bo<sup>11</sup> to read it for you regularly. But whatever anyone may say, you must not allow any of the Nembutsu priests, True Word teachers, or observers of the precepts to look at it. Though people may claim to be disciples of Nichiren, if they do not possess some proof of that fact from my hand, you must not trust them.

With my deep respect,  
Nichiren

The eighth day of the fifth month

To the wife of the lay priest Ichinosawa



## Background

This letter was written at Minobu in the fifth month of the first year of Kenji (1275) and addressed to the wife of the lay priest Ichinosawa who lived at Ichinosawa on Sado Island. Though written to his wife, it was titled *Letter to the Lay Priest Ichinosawa* in a later age, for the letter contains advice relevant to her husband. Perhaps Nichiren Daishonin wrote to the wife, expecting that the lay priest would read the letter,

though he was afraid of being criticized by people for his connection with the Daishonin.

During his exile on Sado, in the fourth month of 1272, the Daishonin was moved to the lay priest's residence at Ichinosawa from the dilapidated hut at Tsukahara where he had lived for five months since his arrival on the first day of the eleventh month of the previous year. The Daishonin's life at

Ichinosawa was more comfortable, and, thanks to the support of the lay priest and his wife, he was able to feed several disciples.

The lay priest seemingly respected the Daishonin, but was unable to discard his faith in the Pure Land school

in fear of what the local people would say about him. Yet the Daishonin tries to awaken the couple to faith in the Lotus Sutra, encouraging them to sever their attachment to the Pure Land teachings for the sake of their next life.

## Notes

1. Hyoe-no-suke Yoritomo is another name for Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147–1199), founder of the Kamakura shogunate, the first warrior government in Japan.

2. The former governor of Musashi refers to Hojo Nobutoki, who held the post of the governor of Musashi from 1267 to 1273 and was also the constable of Sado Province.

3. This tradition probably stems from the ancient Indian belief in Brahma as the creator deity.

4. The three cardinal sins refer here to the three offenses of turning against one's sovereign, parent, and teacher, or in other words, betrayal of Shakyamuni Buddha, who is endowed with these three virtues.

5. The lay priest of the lodgings refers to the lay priest Ichinosawa, to whose wife this letter was addressed.

6. The steward of the area refers to Homma Rokuro Saemon, who was a retainer of Hojo Nobutoki and deputy constable of Sado Province.

7. The identity of the nun of Kamakura is uncertain.

8. So Soma-no-jo is another name for

So no Sukekuni (1207–1274), a warrior descendant of the Taira clan. He was the deputy constable of the island province of Tsushima.

9. The lay-priest magistrate refers to Shoni Sukeyoshi (1198–1281), the constable of Iki, Tsushima, Chikuzen, Buzen, and Hizen provinces. He concurrently held the post of magistrate and was therefore responsible for overseeing the judiciary, temples and shrines, civil engineering projects, and so forth in the Kyushu area. After the Mongol attack in 1274, he became a lay priest, assuming the name Kakue.

10. The Maturato men were members of a league of warriors who controlled the Matura region in Hizen Province (now Nagasaki and Saga prefectures) from the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries.

11. Gakujo-bo (d. 1301) was a disciple of the Daishonin who is said to have lived at Ichinosawa on Sado Island. Originally a believer of the True Word school, he converted to the Daishonin's teaching. He propagated it, establishing a temple called Jisso-ji on the island.