

Winter Always Turns to Spring



To the lay nun Myoichi:

IF the sun and moon were not in the heavens, how could plants and trees grow? Human beings have both a father and a mother. It is hard for children to grow up when even one parent is missing. Your husband had to leave behind a daughter, a son who is ill, and you, their mother, who suffer from a poor constitution. To whom could he have entrusted his family before leaving this world?

At the time of his extinction, the World-Honored One of Great Enlightenment lamented, "Now I am about to enter nirvana. The only thing that worries me is King Ajatashatru." Bodhisattva Kashyapa then asked him, "Since the Buddha's mercy is impartial, your regret in dying should stem from compassion for all living beings. Why do you single out only King Ajatashatru?" The Buddha replied, "Suppose that a couple has seven children, one of whom falls ill. Though the parents love all their children equally, they worry most about the sick child."¹ T'ien-t'ai, commenting on this sutra passage in his *Great Concentration and Insight*, said, "Even if the parents of seven children are never partial, they are still particularly concerned about the sick one." In essence, the sutra is saying that, even if there are many children, the parents' hearts are with the

child who is ill. To the Buddha, all living beings are his children. Among them, the sinful man who slays his own parents and becomes an enemy of the Buddha and the sutras is like the sick child.

King Ajatashatru was the ruler of Magadha. He murdered his father, King Bimbisara, a powerful patron of Shakyamuni Buddha, and became an enemy of the Buddha. In consequence, the heavenly gods forsook him, the sun and moon rose out of rhythm, and the earth shook violently to cast him off. All his subjects defied the Buddha's teachings, and other kingdoms began to attack Magadha. All this happened because King Ajatashatru took the wicked Devadatta for his teacher. As a result, one day virulent sores broke out all over his body, and it was foretold that on the seventh day of the third month he would die and fall into the hell of incessant suffering. Saddened by this, the Buddha was reluctant to enter nirvana. He lamented, "If I can save King Ajatashatru, I can save all offenders in the same way."

Your late husband had an ailing son and a daughter. I cannot help thinking that he may have grieved that, if he were to abandon them and leave this world, his aged wife, as feeble as a withered tree, would be left alone, and would probably feel very sorry for these chil-

dren. In addition, he may also have worried about Nichiren. Since the Buddha's words are in no way false, the Lotus Sutra is sure to spread widely. In that regard, perhaps your husband felt that certainly something would happen and this priest would become highly respected. When I was exiled contrary to his expectations, he must have wondered how the Lotus Sutra and the ten demon daughters could possibly have allowed it to happen. Were he still living, how delighted he would be to see Nichiren pardoned! How glad he would be to see that my prediction has been fulfilled, now that the Mongol empire has attacked Japan and the country is in a crisis. These are the feelings of ordinary people.

Those who believe in the Lotus Sutra are as if in winter, but winter always turns to spring. Never, from ancient times on, has anyone heard or seen of winter turning back to autumn. Nor have we ever heard of a believer in the Lotus Sutra who turned into an ordinary person. The sutra reads, "If there are those who hear the Law, then not a one will fail to attain Buddhahood."²

Your husband gave his life for the Lotus Sutra. His entire livelihood depended on a small fief, and that was confiscated because of his faith in the Lotus Sutra. Surely that equals giving his life for the Lotus Sutra. The boy Snow Mountains was able to give his body for half a verse of a Buddhist teaching, and Bodhisattva Medicine King was able to burn his arms as an offering to the Buddha because both

were sages, and it was like pouring water on fire. But your husband was an ordinary person, so it was like putting paper in fire. Therefore, he must certainly have received blessings as great as theirs.

He is probably watching his wife and children in the heavenly mirrors of the sun and moon every moment of the day and night. Since you and your children are ordinary persons, you cannot see or hear him; neither can the deaf hear thunder nor the blind see the sun. But never doubt that he is protecting you. Moreover, he may be close at hand.

Just when I was thinking that, if at all possible, I must somehow come and see you, you had a robe sent here to me. This was a totally unexpected circumstance. Since the Lotus Sutra is the noblest of all sutras, I may yet gain influence in this lifetime. If so, rest assured that I will look after your children whether you are still living or are watching from under the sod. While I was in the province of Sado and during my stay here [at Minobu], you sent your servant to help me. In what lifetime could I ever forget what you have done for me? I will repay this debt of gratitude by serving you in the next lifetime. Nam-myoho-rence-kyo, Nam-myoho-rence-kyo.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The fifth month

To the lay nun Myoichi



Background

This letter, written in the fifth month of the first year of Kenji (1275), is one of several that Nichiren Daishonin wrote to the lay nun Myoichi, who

lived in Kamakura and was related to Nissho, one of the Daishonin's six senior priest-disciples. Myoichi was an educated woman who had lost her hus-

band and was struggling with the difficulties of raising her children alone. Nichiren Daishonin wrote to encourage her, explaining that believers of the Lotus Sutra are as if in the midst of winter, but that winter unfailingly turns to spring.

This letter reveals that the lay nun's husband was a strong believer, since he continued to follow the Daishonin even when his estate was confiscated because of his faith. He died worrying about the Daishonin, who was then

in exile, and about his wife, whose constitution was frail, and who would have to support their two children. But the Daishonin assures Myoichi that her husband has received the same benefits as sages such as the boy Snow Mountains and Bodhisattva Medicine King, and that he is protecting his bereaved family. One theory maintains that the lay nun is the same person as a believer named Myoichi-nyo who received the letter *The Doctrine of Attaining Buddhahood in One's Present Form*.

Notes

1. Nirvana Sutra.
2. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.