

## The Supremacy of the Law



WHEN Buddhism had not yet been introduced in China, the writings of such sages as the Three Sovereigns, the Five Emperors, and the Three Kings, T'ai-kung Wang, Tan the Duke of Chou, Lao Tzu, and Confucius were called the canons or classics. Through these teachings, the people learned propriety and came to understand the debt of gratitude they owed their parents, and a clear distinction was drawn between the ruler and the ruled, so that the country was governed wisely. The people obeyed the leaders who followed these teachings, and heaven answered their prayers. A child who failed to obey them was labeled as unfilial, and a subject who violated them was punished as a traitor.

When the Buddhist scriptures were first brought to China from India, some people said that they should be accepted, while others said they should be rejected. A conflict arose, and the ruler summoned the two groups to meet and debate the issue. The adherents of non-Buddhist teachings were defeated by the supporters of Buddhism. After that, whenever the two groups engaged in polemics, the devotees of non-Buddhist scriptures were defeated by the Buddhists as easily as ice melts in the sun, or as fire is extinguished by water. Eventually they

ceased to offer any effective opposition to Buddhism.

As more Buddhist sutras were brought to China, it became apparent that some were superior in content or more profound than others. They belonged to different categories such as Hinayana and Mahayana, exoteric and esoteric, provisional and true. To illustrate, all stones are invariably inferior to gold, but gold itself is divided into several grades. No gold found in the human world can match the gold mined from the Jambu River.<sup>1</sup> But the gold from the Jambu River is in turn far less valuable than the gold stored in the Brahma heaven. In the same way, all the Buddhist sutras are like gold, but some are finer and more profound than others.

Those sutras that are called Hinayana are like small boats. They can carry two or three passengers, but not a hundred or a thousand. Even with only two or three persons aboard, they must remain close to this shore and cannot cross over to the other shore. They can be loaded with a small amount of cargo, but not with a large amount. In contrast, the Mahayana sutras are like those huge vessels that, carrying ten or twenty people and loaded with large quantities of cargo, can sail from Kamakura as far as Tsukushi or Mutsu Province.

But the ship of the true Mahayana sutra is incomparably greater than those huge ships that are the other Mahayana sutras. Loaded with a hoard of rare treasures and carrying a hundred or a thousand passengers, it can sail all the way to the land of Korea. The sutra called the Lotus Sutra of the one vehicle is like this. Devadatta was the most evil man in the entire land of Jambudvīpa, but the Lotus Sutra predicted that he would become the Thus Come One Heavenly King. Although Ajatashatru was a wicked king who killed his own father, he was among those present when the Lotus Sutra was preached, and after hearing only a verse or a phrase, formed a connection with the sutra [that would enable him to attain enlightenment in the future]. The dragon king's daughter, a woman with a reptile's body, attained Buddhahood by listening to Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī preach the Lotus Sutra. Furthermore, the Buddha designated the evil era of the Latter Day of the Law as the very time for the Lotus Sutra to be propagated, and bequeathed it to the men and women of that impure age. The Lotus Sutra, the teaching of the one vehicle, is then a sutra as great and as powerful as the ships of the China trade.

Thus all the Buddhist sutras are to the non-Buddhist scriptures as gold is to stones. And all the various Mahayana sutras, such as the Flower Garland, Mahāvairocana, Meditation, Amida, and Wisdom sutras, are to the Lotus Sutra as fireflies are to the sun or moon, or anthills to Mount Hua.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, there is superiority and inferiority not only among the sutras, but also among their adherents. The various teachers of the True Word school, who believe in the Mahāvairocana Sutra, are like fire being put out by water, or dew being blown away by the wind when confronted in debate by the votary of the Lotus Sutra. If a dog barks at a lion, its bowels will rot. The asura demon who

shot an arrow at the sun had his head split into seven pieces. The True Word teachers are like the dog or the asura, while the votary of the Lotus Sutra is like the sun or the lion.

Before the sun rises, ice is as hard as metal. Fire, when untouched by water, is as hot as molten iron. But even the hardest ice easily melts away in the summer sun, and even the hottest fire is easily extinguished by water. The various True Word teachers appear to be most dignified and wise, but they are like one who, forgetful of the sun, expects ice to remain hard forever, or who, not taking water into account, thinks that fire will burn indefinitely.

As you know, before the Mongol attack, the arrogance of the people of our day knew no bounds. Since the tenth month of last year, however, none of them has dared to assume a haughty attitude, for as you have heard, Nichiren alone predicted this foreign invasion. If the Mongols attack our country again, none of the people will have the courage to face them. They will be like a monkey terrified by a dog, or a frog cowering before a snake. This is solely because it is a country that, by allowing the votary of the Lotus Sutra, who is an emissary of Shakyamuni Buddha, to be hated by all the priests of the True Word, Nembutsu, Precepts, and other schools, has harmed itself and incurred the particular wrath of the heavenly gods. Thus all its people have become cowards. They are like fire fearful of water, a tree dreading the ax, a pheasant frightened out of its wits at the sight of a hawk, or a mouse threatened by a cat. Not one of them will be saved. At such a time, what will they do? In battles soldiers regard the general as their soul. If the general were to lose heart, his soldiers would become cowards.

Women regard their husband as their soul. Without their husband, they lack a soul. Nowadays, even married wom-

en find it difficult to get along in the world. Though you have lost your soul, you lead your life more courageously than those who have one. Furthermore, because you maintain your faith in the gods and you revere the Buddha, you are indeed a woman who surpasses others.

Setting aside the adherents of the Nembutsu and other schools, while I was in Kamakura, I had no way of determining whether the faith of individual believers in the Lotus Sutra was deep or shallow. This I came to know only after I had incurred the wrath of the authorities and had been exiled to the island of Sado. Though no one else came to visit me, you, a woman, not only sent me various offerings, but personally made the journey to see me. It was almost too amazing to be true. In addition, you have now called on me here in Minobu. I know of no words with which to thank you. Certainly the heavenly gods will protect you, and the ten demon daughters will have compassion on you. The Buddha promised in the Lotus Sutra that, for women, the sutra will serve as a lantern in the darkness, as a ship when they cross the sea, and as a protector when they travel through dangerous places.<sup>3</sup>

When the Tripitaka Master Kumarajiva was carrying the Lotus Sutra to China, the heavenly king Vaishravana dispatched a vast number of troops to escort him safely over the Pamirs.<sup>4</sup> When the Dharma Teacher Dosho read the Lotus Sutra in the midst of a field, innumerable tigers gathered to protect him.<sup>5</sup> There is no reason why you should not be protected in the same way. The thirty-six deities on earth and the gods of the twenty-eight constellations in the heavens<sup>6</sup> will lend you protection. Furthermore, human beings have two heavenly gods who always accompany them, just as a shadow follows the body. One is named

Same Birth and the other Same Name. Perched on one's left and right shoulders, they protect one [by reporting all of one's deeds to heaven]. Therefore, heaven never punishes those who have committed no error, let alone people of merit.

That is why the Great Teacher Miaolo stated, "The stronger one's faith, the greater the protection of the gods."<sup>7</sup> So long as one maintains firm faith, one is certain to receive the great protection of the gods. I say this for your sake. I know your faith has always been admirable, but now you must strengthen it more than ever. Only then will the ten demon daughters lend you even greater protection. You need not seek far for an example. Everyone in Japan, from the sovereign on down to the common people, without exception has tried to do me harm, but I have survived until this day. You should realize that this is because, although I am alone, I have firm faith.

If a boat is handled by an unskilled steersman, it may capsize and drown everyone aboard. Likewise, though someone may have great physical strength, if he lacks a resolute spirit, even his many abilities will be of no use. In this country, there may be many wise people, but they cannot utilize their wisdom because they are governed by foolish leaders.

In the last Mongol invasion, tens of thousands of soldiers as well as civilians, both male and female, in Iki, Tsushima, and the nine provinces [Kyushu] were killed, captured, drowned in the sea, or fell from cliffs to their death. If the Mongols attack again, this time they will wreak incomparably greater havoc. Kyoto and Kamakura will meet the same fate as Iki and Tsushima. Prepare in advance and flee to some other place. At that time, those who declared they would not see or listen to me will join their palms together and take faith in the Lotus Sutra. Even the adherents

of the Nembutsu and Zen schools will chant Nam-myoho-rence-kyo.

The Lotus Sutra states that if there are men and women who have firm faith in this sutra the Buddha will support them on his shoulders and carry them on his back.<sup>8</sup> The Tripitaka Master Kumarayana was carried by a wooden statue of Shakyamuni.<sup>9</sup> When I was about to be beheaded, the World-Honored One of Great Enlightenment took my place. It is the same in the present as it was in the past. All of you are my lay supporters, so how can you fail to attain Buddhahood?

No matter whom you may marry, if he is an enemy of the Lotus Sutra, you must not follow him. Strengthen your resolve more than ever. Ice is made of water, but it is colder than water. Blue dye comes from indigo, but when something is repeatedly dyed in it, the color is better than that of the indigo plant.<sup>10</sup> The Lotus Sutra remains the same, but if you repeatedly strengthen your resolve, your color will be better than that of others, and you will receive more blessings than they do.

Wood is vulnerable to fire, but sandalwood cannot be burned. Fire is extinguished by water, but the fire that cremated the Buddha's remains could not be quenched. Although flowers are scattered by the wind, those that bloom in the heavens of purity do not wither. Water evaporates in a time of great drought, but not if it enters the Yellow River. The wicked king named Dammira did not incur punishment even when he cut off the heads of Indian monks. But when he beheaded the Venerable Aryasimha, his sword fell to the ground and his arm with it. When King Pushyamitra burned Kukkutarama Monastery to ashes, his head was split by the staves of the twelve gods.<sup>11</sup>

Likewise the people of Japan, by becoming enemies of the Lotus Sutra, have brought ruin on themselves and

their country. And because I proclaim this, I am called arrogant by those of little understanding. But I do not speak out of arrogance. It is simply that if I did not speak out I would not be the votary of the Lotus Sutra. Moreover, when my words prove later to be true, people will be able to believe all the more readily. And because I write this down now, the people of the future will recognize my wisdom.

[*The Annotations on the Nirvana Sutra* states,] "One's body is insignificant while the Law is supreme. One should give one's life in order to propagate the Law." Because my body is insignificant, I am struck and hated, but because the Law is supreme, it will spread without fail. If the Lotus Sutra spreads, my mortal remains will be respected, and if my remains are respected, they will benefit the people. Then I will come to be revered as highly as Great Bodhisattva Hachiman is now. You should understand that, at that time, the men and women who supported me will be honored as greatly as Takenouchi and Wakamiya.<sup>12</sup>

The benefits that come from opening the eyes of even one blind person are beyond description. How then is it possible to describe the benefits that derive from opening the blind eyes of all the Japanese people, and from giving the gift of sight to all human beings throughout Jambudvīpa and the other three continents?<sup>13</sup> In the fourth volume of the Lotus Sutra it reads, "If after the Buddha has passed into extinction one can understand the meaning of this sutra, one will be the eyes of the world for heavenly and human beings."<sup>14</sup> Those who uphold the Lotus Sutra will be the eyes for all of the heavenly and human beings in the world. Therefore, those Japanese who are hostile to me are in effect gouging out the eyes of all the heavenly and human beings in the world. As a result, heaven is enraged and strange events

occur in the skies day after day, while earth is infuriated and calamities strike in a series month after month.

Shakra was a heavenly lord, yet he greatly respected the fox who taught him the Law.<sup>15</sup> As a result, he was reborn as Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings. The boy Snow Mountains honored a demon as his teacher and became the lord of the threefold world. Great sages and honorable priests of old did not reject the Law, no matter what the appearance of its teachers. I may be a foolish man, but I am surely not inferior to a fox or a demon. The noblest people in the present age are in no way superior to Shakra or the boy Snow Mountains, yet because of my low social position, they have rejected my

wise words. That is why the country is now on the brink of ruin. How lamentable! And what I find even sadder is that I will be unable to save those disciples of mine who have pitied my sufferings.

If anything at all happens, please come over here. I will welcome you. Let us die of starvation together among the mountains. And I would imagine that your daughter, Oto, has become a fine, intelligent girl. I will write you again.

Nichiren

The fourth day of the eighth month

To Oto



## Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter at Minobu in the eighth month of the first year of Kenji (1275). It was addressed to Oto, the daughter of Nichimyo, an earnest believer living in Kamakura. This letter, though addressed to Oto, was obviously meant for her mother, whom the Daishonin had called the Sage Nichimyo in a letter dated the fifth month of 1272.

Virtually nothing is known about Nichimyo other than that she visited the Daishonin, with her daughter, while he was in exile on Sado Island. The journey to Sado was a dangerous one, and the Daishonin was greatly impressed by the strength of faith she demonstrated.

In this letter, the Daishonin says, "Ice is made of water, but it is colder than water. Blue dye comes from indi-

go, but when something is repeatedly dyed in it, the color is better than that of the indigo plant." With this paraphrase of a passage in the well-known Chinese classic, *Hsün Tzu*, he encourages Nichimyo to strengthen her faith still more so she can gain even greater vitality and good fortune.

The title for this letter derives from a passage in *The Annotations on the Nirvana Sutra* that reads, "One's body is insignificant while the Law is supreme. One should give one's life in order to propagate the Law." The Daishonin declares that however much people hate and persecute him, because the Law is supreme, it will spread without fail. Then, after his death, his remains, he adds, will be respected, as will those who have aided him.

## Notes

1. In ancient India, the “gold mined from the Jambu River” was imaginary reddish-yellow gold of the highest quality, said to have been mined from the mythological Jambu River that was said to run through groves of jambu trees on Jambudvīpa.

2. One of the five sacred mountains in China.

3. Lotus Sutra, chap. 23.

4. The story of Vaiśhravana, one of the four heavenly kings, dispatching troops to escort Kumārajīva when he introduced the Lotus Sutra to China from central India appears in *The Lotus Sutra and Its Traditions*.

5. Dōshō (629–700) was the founder of the Dharma Characteristics school in Japan. The story of tigers gathering to protect him appears in *Miraculous Stories of Japan*.

6. The thirty-six deities on earth are the benevolent deities appearing in the Beneficent Power Sutra, whose role is to protect those who embrace the three treasures: the Buddha, the Law, and the Buddhist Order. The gods of the twenty-eight constellations in the heavens are the gods of the twenty-eight celestial houses, or lunar mansions. According to tradition, the heavens are divided into four houses of seven major heavenly bodies, each corresponding to the four directions and four seasons: east, or spring; south, summer; west, autumn; and north, winter.

7. *The Annotations on “Great Concentration and Insight.”*

8. Lotus Sutra, chap. 10.

9. According to legend, when Kumārajīva, the father of Kumārajīva, left India, he brought with him a statue of Shakyamuni Buddha. It is said that by day he carried the statue and by night the statue carried him.

This story appears in *A Collection of Treasures*.

10. This expression is based on a passage in the classical Chinese work *Hsün Tzu*. *Great Concentration and Insight* reads, “From the indigo, an even deeper blue.”

11. The twelve gods generally refer to the twelve heavenly gods that protect the world, but here they appear to refer to the two guardian deities of Kukkutarama Monastery, a major center of Buddhism built by Ashoka. According to *The Story of King Ashoka* and other sources, these two deities killed Pushyamitra and his troops when they destroyed the monastery.

12. Takenouchi is a legendary figure who was said to have played an active part in Empress Jingu’s expedition to Korea and later served her son, Emperor Ōjin. Ōjin was deified after death and referred to as Great Bodhisattva Hachiman. Wakamiya refers to Great Bodhisattva Hachiman of Tsurugaoka Hachiman Shrine in Kamakura.

13. According to the ancient Indian cosmology, the world consists of four continents including Jambudvīpa.

14. Lotus Sutra, chap. 11.

15. This story is found in *On “Great Concentration and Insight.”* When a fox on Mount Shita, a place in India, was chased by a lion, it accidentally fell into a dry well and remained there for three days. On the brink of starvation, it resolved to dedicate itself to the Buddhist Law and recited a verse expressing its desire to expiate its past offenses. When the fox’s voice reached the god Shakra on the summit of Mount Sumeru, Shakra rescued it and asked it to preach the Law to him and the other heavenly deities.