

The Problem to Be Pondered Night and Day



THE second volume of the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law states: “If a person fails to have faith but instead slanders this sutra . . . or on seeing those who read, recite, copy, and uphold this sutra, should despise, hate, envy, or bear grudges against them . . . When his life comes to an end he will enter the Avichi hell . . . He will keep repeating this cycle for a countless number of kalpas.”¹ The seventh volume reads, “For a thousand kalpas [they underwent great suffering] in the Avichi hell.”² The third volume mentions [those who wandered in the evil paths for] major world system dust particle kalpas, and the sixth volume refers to [those who were submerged in the realm of suffering for] numberless major world system dust particle kalpas. The Nirvana Sutra states, “Even if you are killed by a mad elephant, you will not fall into the three evil paths. But if you are killed by an evil friend, you are certain to fall into them.”

The Treatise on the Treasure Vehicle of Buddhahood by Bodhisattva Saramati reads: “Those who are ignorant and unable to believe in the correct teaching, who hold false views and are arrogant, suffer such hindrances in retribution for the slanders of their past lives. They cling to incomplete doctrines and are attached to receiving alms and being treated with deference; they recognize

only false doctrines, distance themselves from good friends, approach with familiarity such slanderers who delight in attachment to the teachings of the lesser vehicle, and do not believe in the great vehicle. Therefore they slander the Law of the Buddhas.

“A person of wisdom should not fear enemy households, snakes, the poison of fire, the god Indra, the roll of thunder, attacks by swords and staves, or wild beasts such as tigers, wolves, and lions. For these can only destroy one’s life, but cannot cause one to fall into the Avichi hell, which is truly terrifying. What one should fear is slander of the profound teaching as well as companions who are slanderers, for these will surely cause one to fall into the frightful Avichi hell. Even if one befriends evil companions and with evil intent spills the Buddha’s blood, kills one’s own father and mother, takes the lives of many sages, disrupts the unity of the Buddhist Order, and destroys all one’s roots of goodness, if one fixes one’s mind on the correct teaching, one can free oneself from that place. But if there is someone who slanders the inconceivably profound teaching, that person will for immeasurable kalpas be unable to obtain emancipation. However, if there is one who can cause others to awaken to and take faith in a teaching such as this, then that person

is their father and mother, and also their good friend. This is a person of wisdom. After the Thus Come One's passing, that person corrects false views and perverse thoughts, and causes people to enter the true way. For that reason, he has pure faith in the three treasures, and his virtuous actions lead others to enlightenment."

Bodhisattva Nagarjuna states in his *Treatise on the Discipline for Attaining Enlightenment*: "The World-Honored One expounded five causes³ leading to the hell of incessant suffering. . . . But if, with respect to the profound teaching that one has yet to comprehend, one were to remain attached [to lesser teachings and declare that this is not the Buddha's teaching], then the accumulated sins of all the above-mentioned five acts would not amount to even a hundredth part of this offense."

A wise person, while dwelling in security, anticipates danger; a perverse one, while dwelling amid danger, takes security for granted. A great fire fears even a small quantity of water, and a large tree may have its branches broken by even a small bird. What a wise person fears is slander of the great vehicle. It was on this account that Bodhisattva Vasubandhu declared that he would cut out his tongue,⁴ Bodhisattva Ashvaghosha implored that his own head be cut off,⁵ and the Great Teacher Chitsang made a bridge of his own body.⁶ The Tripitaka Master Hsüan-tsang traveled to the sacred land of India to discern [which teaching represents the truth], the Tripitaka Master Pu-k'ung likewise returned to India to resolve his doubts,⁷ and the Great Teacher Dengyo sought confirmation in China. Did not these men act this way in order to protect the true meaning of the sutras and treatises?

In Japan today, among the four kinds of believers of the eight schools as well as of the Pure Land and Zen schools, from the emperor and the retired em-

peror on down to their vassals and the common people, there is not a single person who is not a latter-day disciple or lay supporter of one of the three great teachers: Kobo, Jikaku, and Chisho. Ennin, also known as the Great Teacher Jikaku, stated, "[Even though the Flower Garland and other sutras are termed 'esoteric,' they do not fully expound the secret teaching of the Thus Come One]; therefore, they differ [from the True Word teachings]."⁸ Enchin, also known as the Great Teacher Chisho, said, "When compared with the Mahavairochana Sutra, the Flower Garland and Lotus are mere childish theory."⁹ Kukai, the Great Teacher Kobo, remarked, "[Each vehicle that is put forward is claimed to be the vehicle of Buddhahood, but] when examined from a later stage, they are all seen to be mere childish theory."¹⁰

Thus all three of these great teachers held that, though the Lotus Sutra is foremost among all the sutras that Shakyamuni Buddha "has preached, now preaches, and will preach," when compared with the Mahavairochana Sutra¹¹ it is a doctrine of childish theory. Should any thinking person give credence to this assertion? A hundred, thousand, ten thousand, million times more than mad elephants, vicious horses, fierce bulls, savage dogs, poisonous snakes, poisonous thorns, treacherous bluffs, steep cliffs, floods, evil men, evil countries, evil towns, evil dwellings, evil wives, wicked children, and malicious retainers, the people of Japan today should fear those high-ranking priests who keep the precepts and yet hold distorted views!

Question: Are you suggesting that the three great teachers mentioned above were slanderers of the Law? Encho, the Great Teacher Jakko, the second chief priest of Mount Hiei; the Great Teacher Kojo, superintendent of the temple; An'ne, the Great Teacher Daigyō; the Reverend Eryō;¹² the

Reverend Annen; the Supervisor of Priests Joka;¹³ the Administrator of Priests Danna; the sage of former times Eshin and several hundred others [of the Tendai school], as well as several hundred of Kobo's disciples including Jitsue, Shinzei, and Shinga;¹⁴ and also the other great teachers and sages of former times of the eight schools and ten schools—all these men were like so many suns, moons, and stars appearing in succession. During the passage of four hundred years and more, not a single person among them has ever questioned this assertion [of the three great teachers]. In the light of what sort of wisdom do you criticize this?

In the light of the above points, this shows, my followers, that you had better cut short your sleep by night and curtail your leisure by day, and ponder this! You must not spend your lives in vain and regret it for ten thousand years to come.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The twenty-third day of the eighth month

To Toki

I have received one string of coins. I hope all those who are serious in their resolve will gather in one place and listen to this letter.



Background

This letter was written to Toki Jonin, a learned and dedicated disciple who lived in Shimosa Province. In it Nichiren Daishonin stresses the extreme seriousness of the offense of slander and also the importance of embracing the supreme Buddhist teaching. The letter is dated simply the twenty-third day of the eighth month, and though it is generally thought to have been written in the first year of Kenji (1275) at Minobu, no firm conclusion has been reached in this regard. Other opinions are that the Daishonin wrote it in 1276 or even in 1273 while he was still on Sado Island.

In the Daishonin's teaching, rather than adherence to a specific code of conduct, one's fundamental posture toward the Mystic Law, or ultimate reality, determines one's happiness or unhappiness in life. A person who seeks and awakens to the ultimate truth within will attain enlightenment, while one

who remains in ignorance of it or even slanders it will continue to be bound by suffering. Hence the Daishonin's emphasis on exclusive commitment to the Lotus Sutra, which teaches the direct attainment of Buddhahood for all people.

In the last part of this letter, the Daishonin raises a question that had crossed many people's minds: on the basis of what sort of insight does he dare to criticize such eminent teachers of the past as Kobo, Jikaku, and Chisho? However, instead of answering this question directly, he simply says, "You had better cut short your sleep by night and curtail your leisure by day, and ponder this!" This passage, from which the letter takes its name, suggests that the most important task of our human existence is to seek out and uphold the correct teaching leading to enlightenment.

Notes

1. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.
2. *Ibid.*, chap. 20. This refers to the karmic retribution suffered by those who persecuted Bodhisattva Never Disparaging.
3. The five causes are the five cardinal sins of killing one's father, killing one's mother, killing an arhat, injuring a Buddha, and causing dissension in the Buddhist Order.
4. According to *The Biography of Vasubandhu*, when Vasubandhu, originally a Hinayana scholar, was awakened to the greatness of the Mahayana by his brother Asanga, he wanted to cut out his tongue to expiate the slander he felt he had committed in preaching the Hinayana teachings and criticizing those of the Mahayana. However, Asanga persuaded him that he could better eradicate his offense by using the same tongue to praise the Mahayana.
5. No mention of this incident appears in the biography of Ashvaghosha. Possibly, after his conversion to Mahayana by Parshva, he felt regret similar to that of Vasubandhu for having previously condemned the Buddhist teachings.
6. Chi-tsang (549–623) was a priest of the Three Treatises school in China, sometimes regarded as the founder of the school. According to *The Supplement to "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra"*, he took T'ien-t'ai as his master and personally served him in reparation for his previously shallow understanding. "Made a bridge of his own body" means that he lifted T'ien-t'ai on his back whenever the latter mounted the elevated lecture platform.
7. According to his biography in *The Sung Dynasty Biographies of Eminent Priests*, Pu-k'ung returned to India to obtain a copy of the Diamond Crown Sutra in order to resolve doubts he had about the Diamond Realm mandala.
8. *A Brief Commentary on the Susiddhikara Sutra*.
9. The precise source for this quotation is not certain. However, *A Personal Commentary on "The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra"* by Shoshin, a priest living between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, quotes Chisho to this effect.
10. *The Precious Key to the Secret Treasury*. This statement means that each of the many schools claims to be the vehicle of Buddhahood, but that their doctrines prove to be shallow when compared with the doctrine of the True Word school.
11. The True Word school argued that the Mahavairocana Sutra, its basic sutra, was expounded by Mahavairocana Buddha.
12. Eryo (801–859) was a priest of the Tendai school. He studied under Encho and Jikaku, the second and third chief priests of Enryaku-ji, and learned both exoteric and esoteric doctrines. He was supervisor of a temple on Mount Hiei called Hodo-in.
13. Jokan (843–927), also known as Zomyo, was initiated into the esoteric teachings by Chisho and in 906 became chief priest of Enryaku-ji. He was named supervisor of priests and later appointed administrator of priests in 923 after his prayers had allegedly cured the emperor of illness.
14. Jitsue (786–847) was originally a priest of the Dharma Characteristics school who became Kobo's disciple after the latter returned from China in 806. Jitsue helped Kobo establish Kongobu-ji temple on Mount Koya. Shinzei (800–860) was a disciple of Kobo who lived at Jingo-ji temple on Mount Takao. In 856, he was appointed administrator of priests, the first True Word priest to receive this title. Shinga (801–879) was a disciple and younger brother of Kobo. He served as chief priest of both Todai-ji and To-ji temples, and was appointed administrator of priests in 864.