

The Embankments of Faith



IN your letter you asked how the retribution varies according to the degree of slander against the correct teaching. To begin with, the Lotus Sutra was taught to lead all living beings to the Buddha way. Only those who have faith in it, however, attain Buddhahood. Those who slander it fall into the great citadel of the hell of incessant suffering. As the sutra states, “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. . . . When his life comes to an end he will enter the Avichi hell.”¹

There are many degrees of slander: shallow and profound, slight and heavy. Even among those who embrace the Lotus Sutra, very few uphold it steadfastly both in mind and in deed. Few are the practitioners who are able to uphold this sutra. But those who do will not suffer serious retribution even if they have committed minor offenses against the sutra. Their strong faith expiates their offenses as surely as a flood extinguishes tiny fires.

The Nirvana Sutra states: “If even a good monk sees someone destroying the teaching and disregards him, failing to reproach him, to oust him, or to punish him for his offense, then you should realize that that monk is betraying the Buddha’s teaching. But if he

ousts the destroyer of the Law, reproaches him, or punishes him, then he is my disciple and a true voice-hearer.”

This admonition urged me on, and I spoke out against slander in spite of the various persecutions I faced, because I would have become an enemy of the Buddha’s teaching if I had not.

Slander can be either minor or serious, however, and sometimes we should overlook it rather than attack it. The True Word and Tendai schools slander the Lotus Sutra and should be severely rebuked. But without great wisdom it is hard to differentiate correctly between their doctrines and the teachings that Nichiren spreads. Therefore, at times we refrain from attacking them, just as I did in *On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land*.²

Whether or not we speak out, it will be difficult for those who have committed the grave offense of slander to avoid retribution. Our seeing, hearing, and making no attempt to stop slander that, if we spoke out, could be avoided, destroys our gifts of sight and hearing, and is utterly merciless.

Chang-an writes, “If one befriends another person but lacks the mercy to correct him, one is in fact his enemy.”³ The consequences of a grave offense are extremely difficult to erase. The most important thing is to continually strengthen our wish to benefit others.

When a person's offense is minor, admonishment is sometimes called for, but at other times it may be unnecessary, for there are those who may correct themselves without being told. Reprove a person for slander when necessary, so that you can forestall for both of you the consequences of an offense. Then, you should forgive that person. The point is that even minor slanders may lead to serious ones, and then the effects one must suffer would be far worse. This is [what Chang-an means when he writes], "One who rids the offender of evil is acting as his parent."⁴

Many such examples of slander are also found among Nichiren's disciples and lay believers. I am sure that you have heard about the lay priest Ichinosawa. Privately he is considered one of Nichiren's followers, but publicly he still remains in the Nembutsu school. What should be done about his next life? Nevertheless, I have presented him with the ten volumes of the Lotus Sutra.⁵

Strengthen your faith now more than ever. Anyone who teaches the principles of Buddhism to others is bound to incur hatred from men and women, priests and nuns. Let them say what they will. Entrust yourself to the golden teachings of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni Buddha, T'ien-t'ai, Miaolo, Dengyo, and Chang-an. This is what is signified by the expression, "practicing according to the Buddha's teachings." The Lotus Sutra reads, "If in that fearful age one can preach this sutra for even a moment, [one will deserve to receive alms from all heavenly and human beings]."⁶ This passage explains that in the evil age of the Latter Day of the Law, when evil persons stained by the three poisons prevail, anyone who believes in and upholds the correct

teaching, for even a short time, will receive offerings from heavenly and human beings.

Now you should make a great vow and pray for your next life. If you are disbelieving or slander the correct teaching even in the slightest, you will certainly fall into the great citadel of the hell of incessant suffering. Suppose there is a ship that sails on the open sea. Though the ship is stoutly built, if it is flooded by a leak, those on the ship are sure to drown together. Though the embankment between rice fields is firm, if there is an ant hole in it, then surely, in the long run, it will not remain full of water. Bail the seawater of slander and disbelief out of the ship of your life, and solidify the embankments of your faith. If a believer's offense is slight, overlook it, and lead that person to obtain benefits. If it is serious, encourage him to strengthen his faith so that he can expiate the sin.

You are indeed an unusual woman since you asked me to explain the effects of various degrees of slander. You are every bit as praiseworthy as the dragon king's daughter when she said, "I unfold the doctrines of the great vehicle to rescue living beings from suffering."⁷ The Lotus Sutra reads, "If one can ask about its meaning, that will be difficult indeed!"⁸ There are very few people who inquire about the meaning of the Lotus Sutra. Always be determined to denounce slander against the correct teaching to the best of your ability. It is indeed wonderful that you should be helping me reveal my teachings.

Respectfully,
Nichiren

The third day of the ninth month
Reply to the lay nun and wife of
Abutsu-bo

Background

This letter is dated the third day of the ninth month, with no year indicated, though it is believed to be 1275, a year and a half after the Daishonin's return from exile on Sado Island. It is addressed to the lay nun Sennichi, the wife of Abutsu-bo.

The letter is a reply to a question the lay nun has asked about the effects of different degrees of slander against the correct teaching. The Daishonin says, "If a believer's offense is slight, over-

look it, and lead that person to obtain benefits. If it is serious, encourage him to strengthen his faith so that he can expiate the sin." But attention should be paid to his warning, "Even minor slanders may lead to serious ones, and then the effects one must suffer would be far worse." The Daishonin praises the lay nun Sennichi for asking a question about slandering the correct teaching.

Notes

1. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.
2. This work attacks chiefly the doctrines of the Pure Land school.
3. *The Annotations on the Nirvana Sutra*.
4. *Ibid.*
5. The ten volumes of the Lotus Sutra consist of the eight volumes of the Lotus Sutra proper and two related sutras, the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra and the Universal Worthy Sutra. Ichinosawa (d. 1278) was a lay priest of the Pure Land school. In the fourth month of 1272, while still in exile on Sado, the Daishonin was trans-

ferred from Tsukahara to the relative comfort of Ichinosawa's estate. In another letter, written to the wife of the lay priest Ichinosawa, the Daishonin expresses misgivings at entrusting a person such as Ichinosawa, whose commitment to faith is unclear, with a copy of the Lotus Sutra, but says that he feels bound to do so by an earlier promise.

6. Lotus Sutra, chap. 11.
7. *Ibid.*, chap. 12.
8. *Ibid.*, chap. 11.