

## On Curing Karmic Disease



I SEE from your letter that you have been stricken with a painful affliction. On the one hand, knowing that you are in agony grieves me, but on the other, I am delighted. The Vimalakirti Sutra states: “At that time the wealthy Vimalakirti thought to himself, ‘I am ill, lying on my bed, [yet why does the World-Honored One, man of great compassion, not take pity on me]?’ . . . At that time the Buddha said to Manjushri, ‘Go visit Vimalakirti, and inquire after his illness.’” The Nirvana Sutra says, “At that time the Thus Come One . . . assumed the appearance of one who is ill in body and lay on his right side like a sick man.” The Lotus Sutra states, “[The Thus Come One is well and happy], with few ills and few worries.”<sup>1</sup> The eighth volume of *Great Concentration and Insight* states: “Vimalakirti lay on his sickbed in Vaisali, making his illness a pretext to promote the teachings . . . Through his death, the Thus Come One taught the eternity [of life], and through illness, the power [of Buddhism].” It also says: “There are six causes of illness: (1) disharmony of the four elements; (2) improper eating or drinking; (3) inappropriate practice of seated meditation; (4) attack by demons; (5) the work of devils; and (6) the effects of karma.”

The Nirvana Sutra reads: “There are three types of people whose illness is

extremely difficult to cure. The first is those who slander the great vehicle; the second, those who commit the five cardinal sins; and the third, icchantikas, or persons of incorrigible disbelief. These three categories of illness are the gravest in the world.”

It also states: “One who creates evil karma in this life . . . will surely suffer in hell. . . . But by making offerings to the three treasures, one avoids falling into hell and receives the retribution in this life, in the form of afflictions of the head, eye, or back.” *Great Concentration and Insight* states, “Even if one has committed grave offenses . . . the retribution can be lessened in this life. Thus, illness occurs when evil karma is about to be dissipated.” In his *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, Bodhisattva Nagarjuna says: “Question: . . . [Answer]: If that is so, then none of the sutras, from the Flower Garland to the Wisdom sutras, is a secret teaching, but the Lotus Sutra is secret. . . . [The Lotus Sutra is] like a great physician who can change poison into medicine.” T’ien-t’ai explained the quotation further, saying: “This can be likened to a skilled physician who can change poison into medicine. . . . That persons of the two vehicles were given the prophecy of their enlightenment in this sutra means that it can change poison into medicine. This is what *Great Perfection of Wisdom*

means when it says, "The various sutras are not secret teachings; only the Lotus Sutra is secret."<sup>2</sup> *Great Concentration and Insight* says, "The Lotus Sutra can cure them [illnesses], which is why it is called *myo*, or wonderful." Miaolo says, "Because it can cure what is thought to be incurable, it is called *myo*, or wonderful."<sup>3</sup>

The Nirvana Sutra states: "King Ajatashatru of Rajagriha was wicked by nature . . . He killed his father, and thereafter, in a fit of remorse, he developed a high fever . . . Because of the fever from remorse, boils broke out over his entire body. They were foul and evil-smelling, so that none could come near. At that time his mother, Vaidehi, tried to help by applying various medicines, but this only made the boils worse; there appeared to be no hope of recovery. The king said to his mother, 'These boils have their origin in the mind; they do not arise from the four elements. Though people say that there is a physician who can cure them, that could not possibly be . . .' Then the World-Honored One, the compassionate and merciful teacher, entered into the moon-loving meditation<sup>4</sup> for the king's sake. Upon entering meditation, he emitted a brilliant ray of light. This ray of clear coolness fell upon the body of the king, and instantly the boils were healed."

The Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law, which is the great wisdom of equality, says in its seventh volume: "This sutra provides good medicine for the ills of the people of Jambudvīpa. If a person who has an illness is able to hear this sutra, then his illness will be wiped out and he will know neither old age nor death."<sup>5</sup>

In light of the above quotations, it would seem that your illness cannot have originated in anything other than the six causes of disease. I will set aside the first five causes for the moment. Illnesses of the sixth, which result from

karma, are the most difficult to cure. They vary in severity, and one cannot make any fixed pronouncements, but we know that the gravest illnesses result from the karma created by slandering the Lotus Sutra. Even Shen Nung, Huang Ti, Hua T'o, and Pien Ch'ueh threw up their hands,<sup>6</sup> and Water Holder, Water Carrier,<sup>7</sup> Jivaka, and Vimalakirti likewise kept silent. Such illnesses can only be cured by the good medicine of the one Buddha Shakyamuni's Lotus Sutra, as that sutra itself explains.

The Nirvana Sutra, referring to the Lotus Sutra, states: "Even the offense of slandering this correct teaching [will be eradicated] if one repents and professes faith in the correct teaching. . . . No teaching other than this correct teaching can save or protect one. For this reason one should take faith in the correct teaching." The Great Teacher Ching-hsi<sup>8</sup> said, "The Nirvana Sutra is itself pointing to the Lotus Sutra and saying that it is the ultimate."<sup>9</sup> He further said: "It is like the case of a person who falls to the ground, but who then pushes himself up from the ground and rises to his feet again. Thus, even though one may slander the correct teaching, one will eventually be saved from the evil paths."<sup>10</sup>

Bodhisattva Vasubandhu was originally a scholar of Hinayana Buddhism. In an effort to prevent Mahayana Buddhism from spreading throughout the five regions of India, he wrote five hundred treatises on Hinayana. Later, however, he encountered Bodhisattva Asanga and abandoned his erroneous views on the spot. Facing Asanga, he said that, in order to eradicate this offense all at once, he wanted to cut out his own tongue. Asanga stopped him, saying, "Vasubandhu, use that tongue to praise Mahayana." Vasubandhu immediately wrote five hundred Mahayana treatises in which he refuted Hinayana. He also made a vow that, as long

as he lived, he would never place the Hinayana teachings on his tongue. In this way he eradicated his past offense and was later reborn in the heaven where Bodhisattva Maitreya dwells.<sup>11</sup>

Bodhisattva Ashvaghosha, a native of eastern India, was thirteenth among the successors of the Buddha's teachings. At one time Ashvaghosha had been a leader of Brahmanism. When he debated with the Buddhist monk Punyayashas over the validity of their respective teachings, however, he quickly realized the superiority of Buddhist teachings. Ashvaghosha was prepared to behead himself in order to pay for his past offense, saying, "I have been my own worst enemy, leading myself to hell." But Punyayashas admonished him, saying, "Ashvaghosha, do not behead yourself! Use that head and mouth to praise Mahayana." Ashvaghosha soon thereafter wrote *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana*, in which he refuted Brahmanism and Hinayana. This marked the beginning of the spread of Mahayana Buddhism in India.

The Great Teacher Chi-tsang of Chia-hsiang-ssu temple was among the most outstanding scholars in China. He was the founder of the Three Treatises school, and lived on Mount Hui-chi in Wu. Believing that none could equal him in knowledge, he raised the banner of his pride to its highest. He challenged the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai to discuss the meaning of the passage that states, "Among the sutras I have preached, now preach, and will preach, [this Lotus Sutra is the most difficult to believe and the most difficult to understand]."<sup>12</sup> In the debate Chi-tsang was soundly defeated and thereupon renounced his misguided beliefs. In order to expiate his serious offense of slander of the correct teaching and of those who uphold it, he gathered more than one hundred eminent scholars and begged the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai Chih-che to lecture to them. Chi-

tsang used his body as a bridge for the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai to climb [onto the preaching platform], supporting T'ien-t'ai's feet with his head. Moreover, he served T'ien-t'ai for seven years, cutting firewood and drawing water for him. He ceased giving lectures of his own, dispersed his followers, and in order to purge himself of his great conceit, refrained from reciting the Lotus Sutra. After the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai's death, Chi-tsang had an audience with the emperor of the Sui dynasty to pay his respects. As he was leaving, he clutched His Majesty's knees and tearfully bade him farewell. Sometime later, Chi-tsang looked into an old mirror and, seeing his reflection, condemned himself for his past errors. All these many acts of penitence were done to eradicate his karmic disease.

The Lotus, the wonderful sutra of the single vehicle, is the golden words of the three kinds of Buddhas.<sup>13</sup> Likened to a bright jewel, it ranks highest among all the sutras that "I have preached, now preach, and will preach." There are passages in the Lotus Sutra that say, "Among the sutras, it [the Lotus Sutra] holds the highest place," and "[Among those sutras] the Lotus is the foremost!"<sup>14</sup> The Great Teacher Dengyo said that [the Lotus school is] the school founded by the Buddha himself.<sup>15</sup>

I have made a thorough study of the various True Word sutras, such as the Mahavairochana, Diamond Crown, and Susiddhikara, but have found nothing written in them to compare with the above passages of the Lotus Sutra. The claim [that these sutras are superior to the Lotus] appears to be no more than a prejudiced view held by Shan-wu-wei, Chin-kang-chih, Pu-k'ung, Kobo, Jikaku, and Chisho. From this we realize that the true intent of the Buddhas Shakyamuni and Mahavairochana lay just in the supremacy of the Lotus Sutra. When the three great teachers

Kobo, Jikaku, and Chisho, the founders of the True Word teachings in Japan, went to China during the T'ang dynasty, they inherited from Hui-kuo and Fa-ch'üan the deceptions and delusions originally held by the three Tripitaka masters Shan-wu-wei, Chin-kang-chih, and Pu-k'ung. When on returning to Japan they propagated the Lotus Sutra and the True Word teachings, they hid the brilliant moon of the Lotus Sutra, the supreme vehicle that surpasses all the other sutras of the past, present, and future, and showed the firefly glimmer of the True Word mandalas of the two realms.<sup>16</sup> Not only that, but they slandered the Lotus Sutra, saying that it was a work of "childish theory" and belonged to "the region of darkness." These comments, however, were like a dagger turned against those who made them. It is not the Lotus but the Mahavairochana Sutra that is filled with childish theory and is in the region of darkness. The founders of the True Word teachings were warped to begin with. So how could their disciples and followers be upright? Contamination at the source of a river will pollute its entire length. Because of this, the Land of the Sun has had a long, dark night, and the Sun Tree is now about to be blighted by an alien frost.<sup>17</sup>

Although you were not in the mainstream of the True Word school, you were still a retainer of a patron of that teaching. You lived for many years in a house whose family was devoted to an erroneous doctrine, and month after month your mind was infected by the teachers of error. Though huge mountains may crumble and the great seas dry up, this offense of yours will not easily pass away. However, because of the influence of karmic bonds and the compassion with which you are imbued in this lifetime, you met me, a priest of humble learning, when you least expected it, and you determined to

reform your ways. Therefore, though at the moment your offense has brought on these boils from which you suffer, in the future you will be spared worse suffering.

King Ajatashatru suffered from severe boils because he committed the five cardinal sins and slandered the correct teaching. But his boils disappeared instantly when the light produced by the Buddha's moon-loving meditation illuminated his body. And, though it had been predicted that the king had only twenty-one days left to live, his life span was extended by forty years. In deep appreciation, he earnestly requested one thousand arhats to record the golden words of the Buddha's entire lifetime,<sup>18</sup> thus spreading the Buddha's teachings into the ages of the Former, Middle, and Latter Days of the Law.

Your boils have resulted from only one offense—slandering the correct teaching. The Mystic Law you now embrace surpasses the moon-loving meditation. How could your boils possibly not be healed and your life span not extended? If these words of mine prove untrue, you should shout: "The Buddha, the eye of the entire world, is a great liar, and the Lotus, the wonderful sutra of the single vehicle, is a scripture of clever flourishes. The World-Honored One should give me proof if he cares about his good name. All the sages and worthies should come to protect me if they do not want to be false to their vows."

A letter cannot convey all that one would like to say, and words cannot fully express what is in the heart. The rest will have to wait until the next time we meet.

With my deep respect,  
Nichiren

The third day of the eleventh month  
Reply to the lay priest Ota

## Background

This letter is a reply to Ota Jomyo's report that he was suffering from a skin disease. Written in the eleventh month of the first year of Kenji (1275), it was sent from Minobu to Ota Jomyo, who lived in Shimosa Province. One of the Daishonin's most devout believers, Ota was a government official who was converted to the Daishonin's teachings by Toki Jonin. Around 1278, Ota received tonsure and was given the Buddhist name Myonichi (Wonderful Sun).

From the content of another letter sent to him by the Daishonin, it appears that he and the Daishonin were the same age.

In this letter, citing T'ien-t'ai's *Great Concentration and Insight*, Nichiren Daishonin refers to the six causes of illness and declares that diseases resulting from one's karma are the most difficult to cure, but that even those can be recovered from with the "good medicine of the Lotus Sutra."

## Notes

1. Lotus Sutra, chap. 15. This is the answer to a question addressed to Shakyamuni Buddha by the Bodhisattvas of the Earth: "Is the World-Honored One comfortable, with few illnesses, few worries?"

2. *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*.

3. *The Annotations on "Great Concentration and Insight."*

4. Moon-loving meditation: Here the boundless compassion of the Buddha is compared to moonlight, which releases one from anxiety and brings about peace of mind.

5. Lotus Sutra, chap. 23.

6. Shen Nung and Huang Ti were two of the Three Sovereigns, legendary ideal rulers of ancient China who were skilled in medical matters. Hua T'o was a physician of the Later Han dynasty, said to have been especially skillful in surgical operations. Pien Ch'üeh was a physician of the Spring and Autumn period (770-403 B.C.E.) in China.

7. Water Holder and Water Carrier were father and son. Said to have been excellent physicians, they are described in the Golden Light Sutra.

8. Another name for Miao-lo. Ching-hsi was the name of Miao-lo's birthplace.

9. *The Annotations on "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra."*

10. Ibid.

11. The story is detailed in Chi-tsang's *Annotations on The One-Hundred-Verse Treatise*. The heaven where Maitreya is said to live is the Tushita heaven, the fourth of the six heavens in the world of desire. Vasubandhu is said to have been reborn in this heaven and to be expounding the Law to the heavenly beings there.

12. Lotus Sutra, chap. 10.

13. Shakyamuni Buddha, Many Treasures Buddha, and the Buddhas of the ten directions.

14. The first quotation is from chapter 23; the second, from chapter 10.

15. Adapted from a passage in *The Outstanding Principles of the Lotus Sutra*.

16. The Womb Realm mandala, described in the Mahavairochana Sutra, and the Diamond Realm mandala, described in the Diamond Crown Sutra.

17. The Land of the Sun refers to Japan, and the Sun Tree is an ancient name for Japan that appears in a Chinese document.

18. Reference is to the First Buddhist Council, which began the task of compiling the Buddha's teachings. With the support of King Ajatashatru, this council was convened in the Cave of the Seven Leaves near Rajagriha in Magadha shortly after the Buddha's passing.