

The Three Obstacles and Four Devils



THE two men you sent have arrived here, bringing your various offerings. I also heard that the priest Ben¹ has written about your sincerity in his letter.

In this letter I want to advise you about what is most important for you. In the Former and Middle Days of the Law, the world did not fall into decline because sages and worthies appeared frequently, and the heavenly gods protected the people. In the Latter Day of the Law, however, people have become so greedy that strife rages incessantly between sovereign and subject, parent and child, elder and younger brother, and all the more so among people who are unrelated. When such conflict occurs, the gods abandon the country, and then the three calamities and seven disasters begin, until one, two, three, four, five, six, or seven suns appear in the sky.² Plants and trees wither and die, large and small rivers dry up, the earth smolders like charcoal, and the sea becomes like boiling oil. Eventually flames fill the atmosphere, arising from the hell of incessant suffering and reaching the Brahma heaven. Such is the devastation that will occur when the world reaches its final dissolution.

Everyone, regardless of rank or status, considers it natural for children to obey their father, for subjects to be loyal to their sovereign, and for disciples

to follow their teacher. Recently, however, it appears that the people of our day, drunk with the wine of greed, anger, and foolishness, make it a rule to betray their sovereign, despise their parents, and scoff at their teachers. You should read again and again the previous letter³ in which I explained that one should of course obey one's teacher, sovereign, and parents, but should they commit wrongs, admonishing them is in fact being loyal to them.

Recently your elder brother, Uemon no Sakan, was again disowned by your father. I told your wife when she came to visit me here that he was certain to be disowned again, that I was apprehensive about how it would affect you, Hyoe no Sakan, and that she should be prepared for the worst. This time I am sure that you will give up your faith. If you do, I have not the slightest intention of reproaching you for it. Likewise, neither should you blame me, Nichiren, when you have fallen into hell. It is in no way my responsibility. It is an undeniable fact that fire can at once reduce even a thousand-year-old field of pampas grass to ashes, and that the merit one has formed over a hundred years can be destroyed with a single word.

Your father, Saemon no Tayu, now seems to have become an enemy of the Lotus Sutra, yet your brother, Uemon

no Tayu Sakan, will now become one of its votaries.⁴ You, who think only of immediate affairs, will obey your father, and deluded people will therefore praise you for your filial devotion. Munemori obeyed his father's tyrannous commands and was finally beheaded at Shinohara. Shigemori disobeyed his father and preceded him in death.⁵ Who was truly the filial son? If you obey your father who is an enemy of the Lotus Sutra and abandon your brother who is a votary of the one vehicle, are you then being filial? In the final analysis, what you should do is resolve to pursue the Buddha way single-mindedly just as your brother is doing. Your father is like King Wonderful Adornment, and you brothers are like the princes Pure Storehouse and Pure Eye. The age is different, but the principle of the Lotus Sutra remains the same. Recently the lay priest of Musashi⁶ abandoned his vast territory and his many subjects in order to retire from all worldly affairs. If you ingratiate yourself with your father for the sake of a small private estate, neglect your faith, and fall into the evil paths, you should not blame me, Nichiren. Yet despite my warnings, I feel that this time you will discard your belief.

I state this out of pity because, though you have been faithful until now, you may still fall into the evil paths. If, by one chance out of a hundred or a thousand, you should decide to follow my teaching, then confront your father and declare: "Since you are my father, I should by rights obey you, but since you have become an enemy of the Lotus Sutra, I would be unfilial if I were to do so in this matter. Therefore, I have resolved to break with you and follow my brother. If you should disown him, be aware that you are disowning me too." You should not have the slightest fear in your heart. It is lack of courage that prevents one from attaining Buddhahood, although one may have professed faith in the Lotus

Sutra many times since innumerable kalpas ago.

There is definitely something extraordinary in the ebb and flow of the tide, the rising and setting of the moon, and the way in which summer, autumn, winter, and spring give way to each other. Something uncommon also occurs when an ordinary person attains Buddhahood. At such a time, the three obstacles and four devils will invariably appear, and the wise will rejoice while the foolish will retreat. I have long been waiting to tell you this, either through my own messenger or by some other means. So I greatly appreciate your sending these messengers to me. I am sure that, if you were about to abandon your faith, you would not have sent them. Thinking it may still not be too late, I am writing this letter.

To attain Buddhahood is difficult indeed, more difficult than the feat of placing a needle atop the Mount Sumeru of this world and then casting a thread from atop the Mount Sumeru of another world directly through the eye of this needle. And the feat is even more difficult if it must be done in the face of a contrary wind. The Lotus Sutra states: "A million million ten thousand kalpas, an inconceivable time will pass, before at last one can hear this Lotus Sutra. A million million ten thousand kalpas, an inconceivable time will pass, before the Buddhas, World-Honored Ones, preach this sutra. Therefore its practitioners, after the Buddha has entered extinction, when they hear a sutra like this, should entertain no doubts or perplexities."⁷ This passage is extremely unusual even among the twenty-eight chapters of the Lotus Sutra. From the "Introduction" to the "Teacher of the Law" chapters, human and heavenly beings, the four kinds of believers, and the eight kinds of non-human beings—those at the stage of near-perfect enlightenment or below—were many in number, but there was

only one Buddha, the Thus Come One Shakyamuni. Thus, these chapters are of great import, but may appear insignificant. The twelve chapters from “Treasure Tower” to “Entrustment” are the most important of all. This is because it is in these chapters that, in the presence of Shakyamuni Buddha, there appeared the treasure tower of Many Treasures. It was as if the sun had emerged in front of the moon. The Buddhas of the ten directions were seated under the trees, and it was as if the grasses and trees of the worlds in the ten directions had been set afire. It was in this setting that the above passage was expounded.

The Nirvana Sutra states: “People have been suffering since numberless, uncountable kalpas ago. The bones one leaves behind in a kalpa pile up as high as Mount Vipula near Rajagriha, and the milk one sucks is equal to the water of the four seas. The blood one sheds surpasses the quantity of water in the four seas, and so do the tears one sheds in grief over the death of parents, brothers and sisters, wives, children, and relatives. And though one used all the plants and trees growing on the earth to make four-inch tallies to count them, one could not count all the parents one has had in the past existences of life.” These are the words the Buddha uttered lying in the grove of sal trees on the final day of his life. You should pay the strictest attention to them. They mean that the number of parents who gave birth to you since innumerable kalpas ago could not be counted even with tallies made by cutting all the plants and trees growing on all the worlds of the ten directions into four-inch pieces.

Thus you have had a countless number of parents in your past existences, yet during that time you have never encountered the Lotus Sutra. From this we see that it is easy to have parents, but very difficult to encounter the Lotus Sutra. Now if you disobey the

words of a parent, one who is easy to come by, and follow a friend of the Lotus Sutra, one who can rarely be encountered, you will not only be able to attain Buddhahood, but will also be able to lead to enlightenment the parent whom you disobeyed. For example, Prince Siddhartha was the eldest son of King Shuddhodana. His father wanted him to succeed to the throne and rule the nation, and actually made him crown prince, but the prince went against his father’s wishes and escaped from the palace at night. The king was angry at him for being unfilial, but after Siddhartha had attained Buddhahood, he set about first of all to convert his parents, King Shuddhodana and Lady Maya.

No parent would ever urge his son to renounce the world in order to attain Buddhahood. But however that may be, in your case, the observers of the precepts and the priests of the Nembutsu school have egged your father on to join with them so that they may make both you and your brother abandon your faith. I am told that Priest Two Fires⁸ is persuading others to chant one million Nembutsu in an attempt to cause discord among people and destroy the seeds of the Lotus Sutra. The lay priest of Gokuraku-ji seemed to be an admirable person. But deluded by the Nembutsu priests, he treated me with enmity, and as a result, he and his entire clan have been all but ruined. Only the lord of Echigo⁹ has survived. You may think that those who believe in Priest Two Fires are prospering, but you should see what has become of the Nago clan,¹⁰ who paid for the building of Zenko-ji temple, Choraku-ji temple, and Dabutsu-den!¹¹ Again, the lord of Sagami¹² is the ruler of Japan, but by his conduct he has called down on himself an enemy almost as great as the land of Jambudvipa.

Even if you abandon your brother

and take his place in your father's favor, you will never prosper in a thousand or ten thousand years. There is no knowing what will become of you even in the near future. How can you be certain of lifelong prosperity? Therefore, you should resolve to give all your thought to your happiness in the next existence. Having written all this, it occurs to me that this letter may be

futile, and I tire of going on. But it may serve as a reminder to you in the future.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The twentieth day of the eleventh
month

Reply to Hyoe no Sakan



Background

This letter was written to Hyoe no Sakan Munenaga, the younger of the two Ikegami brothers. Though it was originally thought to have been written in the first year of Kenji (1275), it is now apparent that it was written in 1277. Munenaga is thought to have taken faith in the Daishonin's teaching around 1256, shortly after his elder brother Munenaka. Both were officials in the Kamakura shogunate, and their father, Yasumitsu, was director of the government's Office of Construction and Repairs.

Yasumitsu was a loyal follower of the priest Ryokan of the True Word Pre-

cepts school who was highly active in political affairs. He strenuously opposed their beliefs and disowned Munenaka twice, in 1275 and again in 1277. By disowning Munenaka, Yasumitsu in effect was provoking a rift between the two sons, tempting the weaker Munenaga to trade his beliefs for the right to inherit his father's estate. Supported by the Daishonin's guidance and encouragement, however, Munenaga upheld his faith together with his brother, and in 1278, after a total of twenty-two years' practice, their united efforts finally led their father to accept faith in the Daishonin's teaching.

Notes

1. Ben is another name for Nissho (1221–1323), one of the Daishonin's six senior disciples. He devoted himself to propagation mainly in Kamakura.

2. The Benevolent Kings Sutra reads, "When two, three, four, or five suns appear at the same time, when the sun is eclipsed and loses its light . . . this is the first disaster."

3. The previous letter refers to *Letter to the Brothers* dated the sixteenth day of the fourth month, 1275.

4. This statement implies that, because the elder brother, Munenaka, will accept disinheritorship and the accompanying social sanctions rather than renounce his faith, he is in effect giving his life for the Lotus Sutra.

5. Munemori (1147–1185) and Shigemori (1138–1179) were brothers and warriors belonging to the Taira clan, which took control of the Japanese court and held supreme power. Shigemori, the first son of Taira no Kiyomori, remonstrated with his father when he tried to confine the Retired Emperor Goshirakawa, while Munemori, the third son, followed his father's instructions. Shigemori died of illness, and Munemori, after the Taira forces were destroyed at Dannoura, attempted to drown himself, but was captured and eventually beheaded at Shinohara in Omi Province.

6. The lay priest of Musashi refers to Hojo Yoshimasa (1242–1281), a top official of the Kamakura government who held impor-

tant posts such as adviser to the regent and provincial governor.

7. Lotus Sutra, chap. 20.

8. Priest Two Fires (Ryoka) is a play on the name of Ryokan, the chief priest of Gokuraku-ji temple of the True Word Precepts school. In the third month of 1275, a fire broke out in Gokuraku-ji where Ryokan was living and spread to the palace of the shogun. The temple burned to the ground, as did part of the palace.

9. The lord of Echigo refers to Hojo Naritoki, the fifth son of Hojo Shigetoki, the lay priest of Gokuraku-ji.

10. The clan of Hojo Tomotoki (1193–1245), the younger brother of Hojo Yasutoki, the third regent of the Kamakura

government. His clan was called the Nago clan after their place of residence in Kamakura. He and his clan are said to have been earnest believers of the Nembutsu school. All six of Tomotoki's sons met tragic ends.

11. A temple by the name of Zenko-ji no longer exists in Kamakura. Choraku-ji was a large temple of the Pure Land school. Daibutsu-den, or temple to house a great statue of Amida Buddha, is known as Kotoku-in.

12. The lord of Sagami refers to Hojo Tokimune (1251–1284), the eighth regent of the Kamakura government. The "enemy," which appears in this sentence, refers to the Mongols who invaded in 1274.