

On Omens



STRANGE occurrences in the heavens astound all people, and calamities on earth disturb everyone. When the Buddha was about to preach the Lotus Sutra, he caused the five omens and the six omens to appear. Of these, the omen of the earth shaking indicates that the earth quaked and trembled in six different ways. The meaning of the six ways is explained in the third volume of the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai's *Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*: "[One of the six is that] the east rises and the west falls. The eastern quarter corresponds to the color blue and governs the liver, and the liver governs the eyes. The western quarter corresponds to the color white and governs the lungs, and the lungs govern the nose. Hence the east rising and the west falling indicates that the benefits of the sense of sight appear, and in response, the earthly desires of the sense of smell disappear. Similarly, when the benefits of the sense of smell appear, in response, the earthly desires of the sense of sight disappear. In like manner, the rise and fall of the other directions signifies the appearance of benefit and the disappearance of earthly desires with respect to the other sensory organs."

Concerning this, the Great Teacher Miao-lo said: "One's six sense organs represent the points of the compass. It

has already been established that the sense of sight and that of smell represent east and west. It follows, then, that the sense of hearing and that of taste correspond to north and south. Center¹ corresponds to the mind, and the four directions, to the body. The body is endowed with the four sense organs, and the mind is generally related to all four. Hence the mind induces rise or fall with respect to [the sensory functions of] the body."²

The ten directions are the "environment," and living beings are "life." To illustrate, environment is like the shadow, and life, the body. Without the body, no shadow can exist, and without life, no environment. In the same way, life is shaped by its environment. The eyes are formed by the eastern quarter. From this we know that the tongue is formed by the southern quarter; the nose, the western; the ears, the northern; the body, all four quarters; and the mind, the center. Therefore, when the people's five sense organs break down, the four quarters and the center will be startled and shaken, and, as signs of the consequent destruction of the land, mountains will collapse, grasses and trees will wither, and rivers will run dry. When the people's eyes, ears, and other sense organs are startled and disturbed, changes will occur in the heavens, and when their

minds are agitated, the earth will quake.

What sutra was ever preached without the earth trembling in six different ways? This occurred each time the Buddha expounded a sutra. However, when the Buddha was about to expound the Lotus Sutra and the earth quaked in six different ways, the people were particularly astonished. Bodhisattva Maitreya asked a question about this phenomenon, and Bodhisattva Manjushri answered. All of this occurred because the omen was greater in both magnitude and duration than when the other sutras were preached, and thus the question, too, was much more difficult to resolve. That is why Miao-lo said, "Was any Mahayana sutra ever preached without multitudes of people gathering, without the Buddha emitting a ray of light from between his eyebrows, without flowers raining down from heaven, or without the earth quaking? However, none of them ever produced such great doubt."³ This comment means that, although there were omens for all the other sutras as well, none was ever as great as those that occurred when the Lotus Sutra was expounded. For that reason, the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai said, "People say that, when a spider weaves its web, it means that some happy event is near, and that, if a magpie chatters, it foretells the coming of a guest. Even minor things are presaged by some sign. How then could great affairs be without omens? By means of the near, the distant is revealed."⁴ Thus when he expounded the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha manifested great portents never seen during his more than forty years of preaching.

The omens that heralded the essential teaching, however, were far greater than the omens that preceded the theoretical teaching, even more so than those had surpassed the omens that preceded the sutras expounded before the Lotus Sutra. The great quakes that

occurred when an enormous treasure tower sprang up from the earth and bodhisattvas as numerous as the dust particles of a thousand worlds emerged from beneath the earth⁵ seemed like gales blowing over the ocean, creating great waves the size of mountains that tossed small boats about like reed leaves, engulfing even their sails. Therefore, while Maitreya had inquired of Manjushri about the omens that appeared in the "Introduction" chapter, with regard to the great omens that occurred in the "Emerging from the Earth" chapter, he questioned the Buddha himself. Miao-lo explained this, saying: "The theoretical teaching concerns matters that are shallow and comparatively recent, and Manjushri could be relied on to answer. But because the Buddha's original enlightenment in the remote past is hard to comprehend, only the Buddha could be depended on for an explanation."⁶ Although the Buddha did not explain matters concerning the theoretical teaching, Manjushri generally understood. But he was unable to even begin to fathom matters connected with the essential teaching. And these great omens concerned events occurring in the Buddha's lifetime.

When the Buddha came to preach the "Supernatural Powers" chapter, he displayed ten supernatural powers. They were supernatural powers incomparably more wondrous than either the omens of the "Introduction" chapter or those of the "Treasure Tower" and "Emerging from the Earth" chapters. The ray of light that the Buddha emitted [from between his eyebrows] in the "Introduction" chapter illuminated eighteen thousand worlds in the eastern direction, but the great rays of light that he emitted [from all his pores] in the "Supernatural Powers" chapter illuminated all the worlds in the ten directions. While the quaking of the earth in the "Introduction" chapter was limited to the lands of a major

world system, in the “Supernatural Powers” chapter the lands of the Buddhas of the ten directions quaked severely, and all the lands trembled in six different ways. The omens that have appeared in our time are exactly like this.⁷ The great omens of the “Supernatural Powers” chapter foretold that the essence of the Lotus Sutra would spread widely after the Buddha’s demise, when the two thousand years of the Former and Middle Days of the Law had passed and the Latter Day of the Law had begun. The sutra states, “Because after the Buddha has passed into extinction there will be those who can uphold this sutra, the Buddhas are all delighted and manifest immeasurable supernatural powers.”⁸ It also speaks of “the evil age of the Latter Day of the Law.”⁹

Question: Now all omens, whether good or bad, foretell something that will occur in an hour or two, a day or two, a year or two, or in seven or twelve years at the most. How could there be omens that foretell what will take place more than two thousand years later?

Answer: The event presaged by omens that appeared during the reign of King Chao of the Chou dynasty became a reality only after 1,015 years.¹⁰ King Kriki’s dream came true only after 22,000 years.¹¹ How, then, can you doubt the appearance of omens 2,000 and more years before the event?

Question: Why were the omens presaging the time after the Buddha’s passing greater than those that concerned his lifetime?

Answer: The earth moves in response to how the people’s six sense organs are affected. Depending on the extent of this influence, the six different ways in which the earth moves will vary in intensity. The sutras preached prior to the Lotus Sutra seem to extinguish people’s earthly desires [associated with their six sense organs], but in

reality they do not. In contrast, the Lotus Sutra conquers the fundamental darkness [from which all earthly desires originate]. Hence the earth shakes severely. Moreover, there are many more evil people in this latter age than during the Buddha’s lifetime. It was for these reasons that the Buddha taught and showed that the omens that would appear in the Latter Day of the Law would be still greater than those of his own time.

Question: What proof can you offer?

Answer: The sutra states, “Since hatred and jealousy toward this sutra abound even when the Thus Come One is in the world, how much more will this be so after his passing?”¹² Setting aside the seven reigns of the heavenly deities and the five reigns of the earthly deities, in the more than two thousand years of the ninety reigns of human rulers, the great earthquake of the Shoka era and the extraordinary phenomenon that appeared in the heavens during the Bun’ei era¹³ were prodigies unprecedented in Japan. If the people are filled with joy, auspicious omens will appear in the heavens, and the god Shakra will shake the earth. If evil thrives in people’s minds, ominous changes will take place in the heavens and terrible calamities will occur on earth. The magnitude of the changes in the heavens varies in accordance with the degree of the people’s anger; the same is true of the disasters on earth. Japan today is filled with people, from the ruler on down to the general populace, with minds of great evil. The source of this evil has arisen in connection with me.

There is a sutra entitled the Protection Sutra, one that came after the Lotus. It relates how King Ajatashatru went to the Buddha and asked, “Every year, my country has been beset by great droughts, violent gales, floods, famine, and pestilence. Moreover, we have been attacked by another nation.

Why should all these disasters occur, when this is the very country in which the Buddha made his advent?"

The Buddha replied: "Splendid, splendid! It is admirable of you, O great king, to have asked this question. But you have committed many wrongs and evils. Among them, you killed your own father, and taking Devadatta as your teacher, you did me injury. Because these two offenses are so serious, your country is beset by innumerable disasters." The sutra goes on to quote the Buddha as saying: "After my death, in the Latter Day of the Law, when monks like Devadatta fill the land, a single monk will appear who embraces the correct teaching. Those evil monks will exile and put to death this man of the correct teaching. They will violate not only the king's consort but also the daughters of the common people, thereby filling the country with the seed of slanderers. For this reason, the nation will suffer various calamities and will later be invaded by another country."

The priests of Nembutsu today are exactly like the evil monks mentioned

in the above sutra. Moreover, the great conceit of the True Word school's teachers exceeds that of Devadatta a hundred, thousand, ten thousand, million times. I will briefly describe the strangeness of the True Word school. Its priests paint a picture of the nine honored ones seated on an eight-petaled lotus in the center of the Womb Realm. Then they climb onto this picture, and stepping on the faces of the Buddhas, conduct their ceremony of anointment. It is as if they were trampling on the faces of their own parents or treading on their emperor's head. Such priests as these fill the entire country and have become the teachers of both high and low. No wonder the nation faces ruin!

This is my most important teaching. I will explain it again on another occasion. I have written to you a little about it before, but do not speak of it indiscriminately to others. You have sent me expressions of your sincerity not just once or twice, but whenever an opportunity presented itself. I can find no words to express my appreciation.



Background

This letter was written at Minobu in the first year of Kenji (1275), when Nichiren Daishonin was fifty-four years old. As the closing part of this letter is missing, the identity of its recipient is uncertain, but it is generally thought to have been addressed to Shijo Kingo, a samurai and one of the Daishonin's most loyal followers. Shijo Kingo was at this time facing opposition from his lord and his fellow samurai on account of his faith.

In the tenth month of 1274, the Mongols launched a massive attack against the southern part of Japan. The

next year, Khubilai Khan again sent envoys, threatening another invasion if the Japanese government did not acknowledge fealty to the Mongol empire. *On Omens* interprets the Mongol threat and other recent calamities in the light of the Daishonin's teaching.

In the beginning of this letter, the Daishonin discusses the omens that appeared when Shakyamuni Buddha expounded the Lotus Sutra in terms of the principle of the oneness of life and its environment. Expanding on this principle, he explains that, when the people's six sense organs, or percep-

tive faculties, are deluded, extraordinary changes occur in the heavens and on earth. This reflects the truth that, while life and its environment may seem to be two independent phenomena, fundamentally they are one and inseparable.

Next, the Daishonin explains that the Buddha's preaching is always preceded by omens, whose magnitude reflects the depth of the teaching about to be revealed. Thus the portents heralding the preaching of the Lotus Sutra were greater than those preceding any other sutra. Moreover, the signs presaging the essential teaching (latter half) of the Lotus Sutra far surpassed those introducing the theoretical teaching (former half). The Daishonin refers to the emergence of the treasure tower and the appearance of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth as omens revealing the superiority of the essential teaching over the theoretical teaching. Furthermore, he says, the great portents of the "Super-

natural Powers" chapter surpass even those, and foretell that the Law of Nam-myoho-enge-kyo indicated in the depths of the "Life Span" chapter will spread widely in the Latter Day of the Law.

The Daishonin then turns to the upheavals and strange occurrences in the Japan of his own time. All of these, he concludes, occur because people oppose the votary of the Lotus Sutra, who propagates its essence in the Latter Day. Specifically, he warns that, because of the slander perpetrated by Nembutsu and True Word priests, Japan will be destroyed by a foreign country. And, he says, the people suffer from great calamities because they are persecuting "a single monk . . . who embraces the correct teaching"—that is, the Daishonin. In this way, he reassures his follower of the correctness of his teaching and emphasizes the inevitability of persecution.

Notes

1. That is, of the compass. The point at which the four directions converge.

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

3. *Ibid.*

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

5. In chapter 11 of the Lotus Sutra, the tower of Many Treasures Buddha emerges from beneath the earth. T'ien-t'ai explained that the tower appeared in order to verify the truth of the theoretical teaching and pave the way for the revelation of the Buddha's original enlightenment in the remote past as taught in the essential teaching. The emergence of the tower is therefore regarded as an omen heralding the preaching of the essential teaching. In chapter 15, the earth opens and the countless Bodhisattvas of the Earth appear. They are later entrusted by the Buddha with the mission of propagating the Mystic Law in the Latter Day of the Law. Their appearance at this point in the sutra provides an opportunity for Shakyamuni to reveal his true identity, which he does in chapter 16, "Life Span."

6. *On "The Words and Phrases."*

7. This refers to the great earthquake that occurred in 1257, which will be referred to later in the text as the "great earthquake of the Shoka era."

8. Lotus Sutra, chap. 21.

9. *Ibid.*, chap. 17.

10. According to *The Record of Wonders in the Book of Chou*, in the twenty-fourth year (trad. date 1029 B.C.E.) of the reign of King Chao, the fourth ruler of the Chou dynasty in ancient China, on the night of the eighth day of the fourth month, five-colored rays of light spread across the sky, the earth shook in six different ways, and, though no rain fell, rivers, streams, wells, and ponds overflowed with water, and all the trees and grasses bloomed and bore fruit. King Chao was surprised, but the Grand Historian Su Yu performed divinations and announced, "A sage has been born in the western region. One thousand years from now, the words of this sage will be brought to this country." It is said that, just as he predicted, 1,015 years after the Buddha's passing, during the reign of Em-

peror Ming in the tenth year of the Yung-p'ing era (C.E. 67), the doctrines of Buddhism were introduced to China.

11. This story appears in the Protection Sutra. King Kriki was the father of Kashyapa Buddha, the sixth of the seven Buddhas of the past, the last of whom is Shakyamuni. One day he dreamed about ten monkeys. Nine of the monkeys harassed the people of the city, robbed them of their food and drink, and went on a destructive rampage. One of the ten, however, would not join the others, but remained sitting in

a tree. He was therefore tormented and expelled from the community of monkeys. When King Kriki asked Kashyapa Buddha about this dream, the Buddha said, "It represents the evil latter age after the passing of Shakyamuni Buddha. The ten monkeys represent his ten kinds of disciples, only one of whom is a true shramana (practitioner) who renounces the world and endeavors to seek the way."

12. Lotus Sutra, chap. 10.

13. This refers to a huge comet that appeared in 1264.