

The Workings of Brahma and Shakra



I RECEIVED on the fourteenth day of the fifth month the horseload of yams that you took the trouble to send me. Considering the labor involved in producing them, yams today are as precious as jewels or medicine. I will comply with the request you made in your letter.

Once there was a man named Yin Chi-fu.¹ He had an only son, whose name was Po-ch'i. The father was wise, and so was the son. One would have thought that no one would try to estrange them, but Po-ch'i's stepmother frequently slandered him to her husband. However, Chi-fu would not listen to her. Undaunted, she continued for several years to contrive a variety of plots against her stepson. In one such scheme, she put a bee into her bosom, rushed to Po-ch'i, and had him remove the insect, making sure as she did so that her husband would observe the scene. In an attempt to have her stepson killed, she then accused him of making advances to her.²

A king named Bimbisara was a worthy ruler and the greatest lay supporter of the Buddha within the entire land of Jambudvīpa. Moreover, he reigned over Magadha, the state where the Buddha intended to preach the Lotus Sutra. Since the king and the Buddha were thus united in mind, it seemed certain that the Lotus Sutra would be ex-

pounded in Magadha. A man named Devadatta wished to prevent this by any means possible, but all his attempts ended in failure. After much thought, he spent several years befriending King Bimbisara's son, Prince Ajatashatru, and gradually obtained his confidence. Then he set out to estrange father and son. He deceived the prince into killing his own father, King Bimbisara.

Now that Ajatashatru, the new king, had become of the same mind as Devadatta and the two had banded together, non-Buddhists and evil men from all five regions of India swarmed like clouds or mist gathering into Magadha. Ajatashatru flattered them and won them over by giving them land and treasures. Thus the king of the state became an archenemy of the Buddha.

Seeing this, the devil king of the sixth heaven of the world of desire descended with his innumerable followers to Magadha and possessed the bodies of Devadatta, Ajatashatru, his six ministers, and others. Therefore, although these people were human in appearance, they wielded the power of the devil king of the sixth heaven. They were more boisterous, frightful, and alarming than a high wind flattening the grasses and trees, a gale stirring up waves upon the sea, a great quake jolting the earth, or a huge fire devouring one house after another.

A king named Virudhaka, incited by Ajatashatru, put hundreds of Shakyamuni Buddha's clan to the sword. King Ajatashatru unleashed a herd of drunken elephants and let them trample to death countless disciples of the Buddha. He also had many other disciples killed by concealing his soldiers in ambush at the roadsides, defiling well water with excrement, or persuading women to bring false charges³ against them. Shariputra and Maudgalayana were severely persecuted.⁴ Kalodayin was buried in horse dung.⁵ The Buddha was forced to survive for ninety days, one whole summer, on horse fodder.

People thought that perhaps not even the Buddha's power could match that of those evil persons. Even those who believed in him swallowed their words and said nothing, and closed their eyes so that they might not see. They could only wave their hands helplessly,⁶ speechless with dismay. Finally, Devadatta beat to death the Thus Come One Shakyamuni's foster mother, the nun Utpalavarna,⁷ and then caused the Buddha's body to bleed. Under these circumstances, there was no one who would side with the Buddha.

And yet somehow, despite all these many persecutions, the Buddha at length managed to preach the Lotus Sutra. A passage from this 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?"⁸ This passage means that, even while the Buddha was alive, the enemies of the Lotus Sutra offered fierce opposition; all the more will they harass those who, in the latter age, preach and believe in a single character or even a single brushstroke in the Lotus Sutra.

In light of this passage, it would seem that no one during the more than 2,220 years since the Buddha expounded the Lotus Sutra has lived it as the

Buddha himself did. Only one who has met with great persecution can be said to have mastered the Lotus Sutra. The great teachers T'ien-t'ai and Dengyo would appear to have been votaries of the Lotus Sutra, but they did not meet persecutions as severe as the Buddha did in his lifetime. They encountered only minor opposition—T'ien-t'ai from the three schools of the south and seven schools of the north, and Dengyo from the seven major temples of Nara. Neither of them was persecuted by the ruler of the state, attacked by sword-brandishing multitudes, or abused by the entire nation. [According to the Lotus Sutra,] those who believe in the Lotus Sutra after the Buddha's passing will suffer obstacles more terrible than those of the Buddha. Yet neither T'ien-t'ai nor Dengyo met oppression as harsh as what the Buddha did, let alone persecutions that were greater or more numerous.

When a tiger roars, gales blow; when a dragon intones, clouds gather.⁹ Yet a hare's squeak or a donkey's bray causes neither winds nor clouds to arise. As long as the foolish read the Lotus Sutra and the worthy lecture on it, the country will remain quiet and undisturbed. But it is stated that, when a sage emerges and preaches the Lotus Sutra exactly as the Buddha did, the nation will be thrown into an uproar, and persecutions greater than those during the Buddha's lifetime will arise.

Now I am not a worthy, let alone a sage. I am the most perverse person in the world. However, my actions seem to be in exact accord with what the sutra teaches. Therefore, whenever I meet great difficulties, I am more delighted than if my deceased parents had returned to life, or than one who sees the person one hates meet with some mishap. I am overjoyed that I, a foolish man, should be regarded as a sage by the Buddha. Suppose there are wise persons who strictly observe the

two hundred and fifty precepts and are revered by the entire nation more than the lord Shakra is by all heavenly beings. Yet what if, in the eyes of Shakyamuni Buddha and the Lotus Sutra, they are as sinister as Devadatta? They may appear respectable now, but what horrors await them in their next life!

If rumor spreads that you appear to be a votary of the Lotus Sutra, both those who are close to you and those who are not will unexpectedly admonish you as if they were your true friends, saying, "If you believe in the priest Nichiren, you will surely be misled. You will also be in disfavor with your lord." Then, because the plots that people devise are fearsome even to worthy persons, you will certainly abandon your faith in the Lotus Sutra. So it is advisable that you do not carelessly let it be known that you are a believer. Those possessed by a great devil will, once they succeed in persuading a believer to recant, use that person as a means for making many others abandon their faith.

Sho-bo, Noto-bo, and the lay nun of Nagoe¹⁰ were once Nichiren's disciples. Greedy, cowardly, and foolish, they nonetheless pass themselves off as wise persons. When persecutions befell me, they took advantage of these to convince many of my followers to drop out. If you allow yourself to be so persuaded, those in Suruga who seem to believe in the Lotus Sutra, as well as the others who are about to take faith in it, will all discard the sutra without exception. There are a few in this province of Kai who have expressed their desire to take faith. Yet I make it a rule not to permit them to join us unless they remain steadfast in their resolve. Some people, despite their shallow understanding, pretend staunch faith and speak contemptuously to their fellow believers, thus often disrupting the faith of others. Leave such people strictly alone. The time will certainly come

when, by the workings of Brahma, Shakra, and other gods, the entire Japanese nation will simultaneously take faith in the Lotus Sutra. At that time, I am convinced, many people will insist that they too have believed since the very beginning.

If your faith is firm, then you should single-mindedly resolve: "I maintain faith not for the sake of other people but for the benefit of my deceased father. Others will not perform memorial services for him; because I am his son, I am the one who must pray for his repose. I govern one village. I will spend one half of my revenue making offerings for the sake of my deceased father, and use the other half to feed my wife, children, and clansmen. Should an emergency arise, I will give my life for my lord." Speak in a mild manner, no matter what the circumstances.

If people should try to weaken your belief in the Lotus Sutra, consider that your faith is being tested. Tell them sardonically, "I deeply appreciate your warning. However, you should save your admonishment for yourselves. I know well that our lord does not approve of my faith. The idea of your threatening me in his name is simply absurd. I was contemplating visiting you all and giving you some advice, but you came here before I could follow through. You will surely join your palms together and beseech me for help when you, along with your beloved wife and children, are dragged out before King Yama."

What you say about Niida¹¹ may well be true. I have also heard about the people at Okitsu.¹² If the occasion arises, you should behave exactly as they did. When those of rank reproach you for your faith, think of them as worthy adversaries of the Lotus Sutra. Consider it an opportunity as rare as the blossoming of the udumbara plant, or the blind turtle encountering a float-

ing sandalwood log,¹³ and reply to them firmly and resolutely.

There have been instances in which those who governed a thousand or ten thousand *cho* of land had their lives summarily taken and their estates confiscated over trifling matters. If you give your life now for the sake of the Lotus Sutra, what is there to regret? Bodhisattva Medicine King burned his own body for twelve hundred years and became a Buddha. King Suzudan made a bed of his own body for his teacher for a thousand years; as a result, he was reborn as Shakyamuni Buddha.

Make no mistake. If you abandon your faith in the Lotus Sutra now, you will only make yourself the laughing-stock of your foes. Shamelessly pretending friendship, they will try to maneuver you into recanting, with the

intention of later laughing at you and letting others ridicule you as well. Let them say all they have to say. Then tell them, "Instead of advising me in the presence of many people, why don't you admonish yourselves first?" With this remark, abruptly rise from your seat and depart.

Please let me know in a day or two what has happened since you wrote. There are so many things I want to say that I cannot write all of them here. I will do so in my future letters.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The fifteenth day of the fifth month
in the third year of Kenji (1277)

Reply to Ueno



Background

This letter, written at Minobu in 1277, is entitled *The Workings of Brahma and Shakra*, because it contains the passage, "The time will certainly come when, by the workings of Brahma, Shakra, and other gods, the entire Japanese nation will simultaneously take faith in the Lotus Sutra." In this letter Nichiren Daishonin encourages the nineteen-year-old Nanjo Tokimitsu, who succeeded

his father as steward of Ueno Village in Fuji District of Suruga Province, to maintain his faith. He also advises Tokimitsu on how to respond to those who attempt to threaten or deceive him into discarding his faith. For if they succeed in their attempt, the Daishonin warns, they will use him "as a means for making many others abandon their faith."

Notes

1. A minister who served King Hsüan, the eleventh ruler of China's Chou dynasty who reigned from 828 to 782 B.C.E. He is said to have helped Hsüan restore the dynasty's declining fortunes.

2. This story appears in *Tales of Times Now Past*. With this scheme, the stepmother succeeded in arousing Chi-fu's suspicions. Po-ch'i, distressed, left home and drowned himself.

3. In an attempt to disgrace and create

animosity against the Buddha's followers, Ajatashatru persuaded women to pretend to have been impregnated by these followers.

4. According to *The Monastic Rules on Various Matters*, Shariputra and Maudgalyayana, leading disciples of Shakyamuni, while on their travels to spread Buddhism in Rajagriha, once refuted the master of a group of Brahmans. As a result, they were attacked with staves, and Maudgalyayana is said to have been beaten to death.

5. According to *The Ten Divisions of Monastic Rules*, Kalodayin, a disciple of Shakyamuni Buddha, was given offerings by a woman when he was going about begging for alms in Shravasti. Her jealous husband killed Kalodayin and buried his head in horse dung.

6. This indicates a gesture of advising others not to speak out.

7. According to most accounts, Shakyamuni's foster mother was his maternal aunt, Mahaprajapati, under whose guidance the nun Utpalavarna is said to have attained the state of arhat. The story of Utpalavarna is found in *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*.

8. Lotus Sutra, chap. 10.

9. This refers to a traditional Chinese saying. According to popular belief, the roaring of a tiger causes the wind to arise, and the chanting of a dragon produces rain. Nichiren Daishonin cites these beliefs to indicate that a great action invites repercussions of the same magnitude.

10. Disciples of the Daishonin who later abandoned their faith. Sho-bo is said to have begun doubting the Daishonin around the time of the Izu Exile in 1261. Noto-bo is said to have lost his faith around 1271. The lay nun of Nagoe, the wife of Hojo

Tomotoki, a younger brother of the third regent Yasutoki, abandoned her faith around the time of the Tatsunokuchi Persecution in 1271.

11. Niida Shiro Nobutsuna, a follower of the Daishonin who lived in Hatake of Izu Province. He was an elder brother of Nichimoku Shonin (1260-1333), and his mother was an elder sister of Nanjo Tokimitsu. Together with Tokimitsu and others, he endeavored to spread the Daishonin's teachings in northern Japan. What Tokimitsu reported about him is not clear, but presumably the Daishonin means that Niida never yielded to persecution but steadfastly maintained his faith.

12. A village located on the shore of Suruga Bay. The "people at Okitsu" possibly refers to Joren-bo, a disciple who lived here and had a close connection with the lay priest Takahashi of Fuji District, and to other followers.

13. The udumbara plant is said to bloom once every three thousand years to herald the advent of a Buddha. The analogy of the blind turtle is mentioned in chapter 27 of the Lotus Sutra, which says that encountering Buddhism is as rare as a one-eyed turtle finding a floating sandalwood log with a hollow in it to hold him.