

Reply to Yasaburo



[I SUGGEST you begin the religious debate with these words:] “Although I am an ignorant layman, among the teachings I have heard, I was especially impressed by the passage in the second volume of the Lotus Sutra that reads, ‘Now this threefold world [is all my domain . . .]’ ”¹ This sutra passage means that this country of Japan is the domain of Shakyamuni Buddha. In addition to the fact that all the gods, such as the Sun Goddess, Great Bodhisattva Hachiman, and Emperor Jimmu, and all the people, from the ruler of the nation on down, dwell within his realm, he is the Buddha to whom we living beings are greatly indebted for three reasons. First, he is our sovereign; second, he is our teacher; and third, he is our father. Among all the Buddhas of the ten directions, only Shakyamuni Buddha is endowed with these three virtues. Therefore, even if all the people of the country of Japan were to serve Shakyamuni Buddha wholeheartedly just as they now do Amida Buddha, if they were to place him side by side with another Buddha and treat him in the same manner, that would still be a grave error. For example, though someone were our own ruler and wise besides, if we were to shift our allegiance to the ruler of another country—for instance, if, while dwelling in Japan, we were to pay honor to the king of China or Koryō, and

slight the sovereign of Japan—could we be called persons who honor the great sovereign of this country?

This is all the more true in the case of the priests of Japan, who without exception have shaved their heads and donned their robes as disciples of the Thus Come One Shakyamuni. They are not the disciples of Amida Buddha. However, priests who have no halls in their temples where Shakyamuni is enshrined or where the Lotus meditation² is practiced, and who have neither painted nor wooden images [of Shakyamuni] nor even a copy of the Lotus Sutra, have set aside Shakyamuni Buddha, who is fully endowed with the three virtues. In each district, village, and household throughout the country, they have erected more images than there are people of Amida Buddha, who possesses not a single one of these virtues, and they chant the name of Amida Buddha exclusively, sixty thousand or eighty thousand times a day. Although such acts appear to be most admirable, when we view the matter in the light of the Lotus Sutra, we find that these good people are guilty of offenses heavier than those of wicked men who daily commit the ten evil acts. Evil people do not rely on any Buddha whatsoever, so they cannot be accused of disloyalty. Moreover, if they should become good people, they

might even devote themselves to the Lotus Sutra. Yet it is difficult to imagine that the people of Japan could ever turn their hearts with more seriousness and affection toward Shakyamuni Buddha than Amida Buddha, or toward the Lotus Sutra than the Nembutsu. Thus, they are evildoers who only resemble virtuous people. And among evildoers, they are the worst of the most terrible slanderers and icchantikas, or persons of incorrigible disbelief, in all Jambudvīpa. With regard to such people, Shakyamuni Buddha declared in the second volume of the Lotus Sutra, "When his life comes to an end he will enter the Avichi hell."³

The priests of Japan today are all men of great evil, surpassing even Devadatta or the Venerable Kokalika. And because lay people revere them and make them offerings, this country is being transformed before our very eyes into the hell of incessant suffering, where countless people in their present existence, in addition to undergoing starvation, pestilence, and horrible agonies unknown in previous ages, will be attacked by a foreign power. This is due solely to the workings of deities like Brahma, Shakra, and the gods of the sun and moon.

In all Japan, I alone understand why such things are happening. At first I pondered whether or not I should speak out. Yet what was I to do? Could I turn my back on the teachings of the Buddha who is father and mother to all living beings? Resolving to bear whatever might befall me, I began to speak out, and in these more than twenty years I have been driven from my dwelling, my disciples have been killed, and I have been wounded, exiled twice, and finally was nearly beheaded. I spoke out solely because I had long known that the people of Japan would meet with great suffering, and I felt pity for them. Thoughtful persons should therefore realize that I have met these trials for their sake. If they were

people who understood their obligations or were capable of reason, then out of two blows that fall on me, they would receive one in my stead. But far from it—rather, they arouse hatred toward me, which is something I cannot understand. And lay people, not having heard the truth, either drive me from my dwelling place or hate my disciples. It is beyond comprehension. For example, even if unwittingly we mistook our parents for enemies and reviled or struck and killed them, how could we avoid the guilt of that offense? These people, failing to recognize their own rudeness, seem to think that I am rude. They are like a jealous woman with furious eyes who, unaware that when she glares at a courtesan her own expression is disagreeable, instead complains that the courtesan's gaze is frightening.

Explain that these things have happened solely because the ruler has failed to inquire [about Buddhist doctrines]. And that the reason no inquiry has been made is that the people of this country are guilty of so many offenses that their evil karma has destined them unflinchingly to be attacked by a foreign country in this lifetime and to fall into the hell of incessant suffering in the next.

[And please add something along these lines:] "I believe this because it is clearly recorded in the sutras. Even though you may attack and threaten insignificant persons like ourselves or drive us from our homes, in the end you will never get away with it. The resolve of this priest is such that it is most unlikely that even the Sun Goddess or Great Bodhisattva Hachiman can make him obey, let alone ordinary persons! That is why we hear that he has never quailed, even in the face of repeated persecutions, but has instead become all the more firmly determined."

Now if that priest objects, then re-

spond by asking if what you have just said is a distorted view. Ask him whether or not the Lotus Sutra contains a passage stating that Shakyamuni Buddha is our parent, our teacher, and our sovereign. If he answers that it does, demand to know if a passage exists stating that Amida Buddha is his parent, sovereign, and teacher: Yes or no? If he replies that such a sutra passage exists, insist on knowing whether or not he has two fathers. But if he says that no such passage exists, then demand to know how, having abandoned his parent, he could treat another person well. In addition, you should assert that the Lotus Sutra in no way resembles the other sutras, quoting the passage, “In these more than forty years, [I have not yet revealed the truth].”⁴ If he attempts to cite the passage “She will immediately go to the World of Peace and Delight,”⁵ then demand to know if he admits that he is at a loss to reply to your question. If he admits this, then you should further explain the meaning of this passage.

You must be firmly resolved. Do not begrudge your fief; do not think of

your wife and children. And do not depend on others. You must simply make up your mind. Look at the world this year as a mirror. The reason that you have survived until now when so many have died was so that you would meet with this affair. This is where you will cross the Uji River. This is where you will ford the Seta.⁶ This will determine whether you win honor or disgrace your name. This is what is meant when it is said that it is difficult to be born as a human being, and that it is difficult to believe in the Lotus Sutra. You should pray intently that Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and the Buddhas of the ten directions will all gather and enter into your body to assist you. If you happen to be summoned before the steward, you should first explain all this thoroughly.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The fourth day of the eighth month
in the third year of Kenji (1277),
cyclical sign *hinoto-ushi*

Reply to Yasaburo



Background

This letter was written at Minobu to the believer Yasaburo. One explanation identifies Yasaburo with a man named Saito Yasaburo, who lived at Numazu in Suruga Province. The wording of the last paragraph suggests that he may have been a samurai.

Yasaburo had evidently sought the Daishonin’s advice in preparation for an upcoming debate with a priest of the Pure Land school. This letter is the Daishonin’s reply. It can be roughly divided into two parts. The first and longer part outlines the general argument that the Daishonin suggests Yasa-

bu should present in debating with a follower of the Pure Land school. The second, beginning from “Now if that priest objects . . .,” instructs Yasaburo in how to press his opponent on specific points and urges him to muster up a resolute spirit.

The letter states that only Shakyamuni possesses the three virtues of sovereign, teacher, and parent with respect to the people of this saha world. In the Daishonin’s day, due to the growing influence of the Pure Land school, people tended increasingly to place their trust in Amida Buddha of the Western

Paradise, hoping to win rebirth in his Pure Land after death. But the Daishonin stressed the importance of reverence for Shakyamuni, the historical founder of Buddhism who actually appeared in this world. Here he asserts that to worship Amida and slight Shakyamuni is an act of utter disloyalty. Thus, though the believers in Amida may seem

to be devoted to pious acts, they are in fact guilty of an offense far worse than that of impious men with no religious awareness whatsoever. Their grave error, the Daishonin says, is bringing disaster on the country in the form of famine, epidemics, and the impending Mongol invasion.

Notes

1. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3. This passage indicates the Buddha's three virtues: "Now this threefold world is all my domain [the virtue of sovereign], and the living beings in it are all my children [the virtue of parent]. Now this place is beset by many pains and trials. I am the only person who can rescue and protect others [the virtue of teacher]."

2. A meditation established by T'ien-t'ai on the basis of the Lotus Sutra, aimed at perceiving the ultimate reality. Carried out over a twenty-one-day period, it combined both walking and seated meditation, worship of the Buddha, repentance, and sutra chanting.

3. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.

4. Immeasurable Meanings Sutra.

5. Lotus Sutra, chap. 23. This passage means that a woman who embraces the Lotus Sutra can, at death, attain immediate rebirth in the World of Peace and Delight, or Amida's Pure Land. The Daishonin anticipates that Yasaburo's opponent may quote this passage in an attempt to justify his wor-

ship of Amida. By citing it in this context, however, he will be demonstrating that he in fact does regard another Buddha as equal to Shakyamuni. Having persuaded him to acknowledge that error, Yasaburo should "further explain the meaning of this passage"—in other words, that it is not a rationale for worshipping Amida, but rather expresses the blessings of the Lotus Sutra.

6. Uji River: The middle reaches of the Seta River, which originates at the southern edge of Lake Biwa and flows through Kyoto Prefecture, eventually emptying into Osaka Bay. In ancient times, it marked the southeastern line of defense for Kyoto, the capital, and was the site of several famous battles. Because of its strategic importance, whether or not one succeeded in crossing the Uji River determined one's troops' victory or defeat. Seta, the area facing the site where this river emerges from the lake, was another strategic point of defense. Thus, "crossing the Uji River" and "fording the Seta" have the identical meaning: winning decisively.