

The Hero of the World



HAVING glanced through your letter, I feel as relieved as if the day had finally broken after a long night, or as if I had returned home after a long journey.

Buddhism primarily concerns itself with victory or defeat, while secular authority is based on the principle of reward and punishment. For this reason, a Buddha is looked up to as the Hero of the World,¹ while a king is called the one who rules at his will. India is called the Land of the Moon,² and our country, the Land of the Sun. Of the eighty thousand countries in the land of Jambudvīpa, India is one of the largest, and Japan, one of the smallest. When it comes to the auspiciousness of their names, however, India ranks second and Japan first. Buddhism began in the Land of the Moon; it will reside in the Land of the Sun. It is in the natural course of events that the moon appears in the west³ and travels eastward while the sun proceeds from east to west. This truth is as inalterable as the fact that a magnet attracts iron, or that the ivory plant⁴ is nourished by the sound of thunder. Who could possibly deny it?

Let us examine how Buddhism came to Japan. Our country was first under the seven reigns of the heavenly deities and then under the five reigns of the earthly deities. Their reigns were fol-

lowed by the age of human sovereigns, the first being Emperor Jimmu. The thirtieth emperor was Kimmei, who reigned for thirty-two years. In those days there was a state called Paekche⁵ to the west of this country. It was under the suzerainty of the Japanese emperor and was governed by a king named Syōngmyōng. When the king made his annual tribute to Japan on the thirteenth day, with the cyclical sign *kanoto-tori*, of the tenth month in the thirteenth year of Emperor Kimmei's reign (552), the year with the cyclical sign *mizunoe-saru*, he sent along with it a gilded bronze image of Shakyamuni Buddha, a number of Buddhist scriptures, and also priests and nuns. Overjoyed, the emperor sought counsel from his ministers as to whether or not the nation should worship the Buddha of the western countries.

The Great Minister Iname⁶ of the Soga clan said, "All the countries of the west worship this Buddha. Why should Japan alone deny him?" However, the Chief Minister Okoshi of the Mononobe clan, Nakatomi no Kamako,⁷ and others advised the emperor, saying: "The sovereign who rules over our nation has traditionally performed rites throughout the four seasons of the year in honor of heaven and earth, the gods of the land and of grain, and numerous other deities. If we alter this

custom in favor of the god of the west, our native deities will be angered." Unable to decide, the emperor decreed that the Great Minister Soga alone should worship the Buddha by way of trial, and that no one else should do so. Soga was exceedingly glad to receive this decree. He took the image of Shakyamuni Buddha to his residence at a place called Ohada⁸ and enshrined it there, to the surprise and outrage of the Chief Minister Mononobe.

At that time, a terrible epidemic broke out in Japan and killed a majority of the populace. Since it seemed as though the entire nation would perish, the Chief Minister Mononobe took this opportunity to declare to the emperor that the Buddha image should be destroyed. The emperor concurred and commanded that Buddhism, a foreign religion, be discarded immediately. The Chief Minister Mononobe, acting on the emperor's behalf, confiscated the statue, heated it in a charcoal fire, and smashed it with a hammer. He razed the Buddha image hall and flogged the priests and nuns. Then, although the sky was cloudless, a gale blew and rain fell. The imperial palace was consumed in a fire that descended from heaven.⁹ All three men—the emperor, Mononobe, and Soga—fell ill in the epidemic. Each suffered excruciating agony, as though he were being mangled or burned alive. Mononobe finally died, while the emperor and Soga barely recovered. From that time, nineteen years passed without anyone taking faith in Buddhism.

The thirty-first emperor, Bidatsu, was the second son of Kimmei. He reigned for fourteen years, aided by the ministers of the left and right. One of them was a son of the Chief Minister Mononobe no Okoshi, Yuge no Moriya,¹⁰ who had succeeded to his father's position. The other was a son of the Great Minister Soga no Iname, Soga no Umako [who also assumed his father's

position]. It was during Emperor Bidatsu's reign that Prince Shotoku was born. He was a son of Emperor Yomei and a nephew of Bidatsu. One day in the second month of the year when the prince was two years old, he faced the east, extended his third finger, and chanted "Hail, Buddha," whereupon the Buddha's ashes materialized in his palm. This was the first time that anyone in Japan had invoked the name of Shakyamuni Buddha.

When the prince was only eight years old, he proclaimed, "Those who, in the latter age, worship the image of the sage of the west, Shakyamuni Buddha, will forestall calamities and receive benefits. Those who despise it will invite disasters and have their lives shortened." Hearing this, the Chief Minister Mononobe no Moriya and others said in anger, "The Sogas have been worshiping the god of a foreign land in violation of the imperial decree." Epidemics still raged incessantly, nearly wiping out the entire populace. Mononobe no Moriya reported this to the emperor. The emperor issued a decree, which stated, "Soga no Umako has been upholding Buddhism. Practice of this religion must cease."

In compliance with the imperial command, Moriya, together with Nakatomi no Katsumi,¹¹ marched upon the temple. There they demolished the hall and pagoda, burned and destroyed the Buddha image, and set fire to the temple. They stripped the priests and nuns of their surplices and punished them with whips. After this incident, the emperor as well as Moriya and Umako fell ill in an epidemic. All three said that they felt as though they were being burned alive or hacked to pieces. Moreover, boils called smallpox appeared all over their bodies. Umako, lamenting in anguish, said, "Still, we should worship the three treasures." The emperor commanded that Umako alone should do so, and that no one else must follow

suit. Overjoyed, Umako had a monastery built and there worshiped the three treasures.

The emperor [Bidatsu] finally died on the fifteenth day of the eighth month in the year when Prince Shotoku was fourteen. Yomei became thirty-second emperor and reigned for two years. He was a son of Kimmei and the father of Shotoku. In the fourth month of the second year of his reign (587), cyclical sign *hinoto-hitsuji*, he fell ill in an epidemic. Thereupon he expressed a desire to embrace the three treasures. Soga no Umako insisted that the imperial wish be honored, and finally brought a priest called Toyokuni¹² into the imperial palace. Mononobe no Moriya and others flew into a rage, and in their fury, swore to invoke a curse upon the emperor. At length the emperor passed away.

In the fifth month of that year, Moriya and his clan entrenched themselves at his residence in Shibukawa and assembled a large number of troops there. Prince Shotoku and Umako advanced on the enemy's position and fought. The fifth, sixth, and seventh months saw a total of four encounters. The prince lost the first three. Before the fourth battle took place, he offered a prayer and vowed that he would build a stupa for the preservation of the Thus Come One Shakyamuni's ashes and also construct Shitenno-ji, temple of the four heavenly kings. Umako similarly pledged that he would erect a temple and enshrine the image of Shakyamuni Buddha that had been sent from Paekche.

When the fighting began, Moriya shouted at the prince, "It is not I but the god of my ancestors, the great deity¹³ enshrined at Futsu, who shoots this arrow." The arrow flew far and struck the prince's armor. The prince responded by calling out, "It is not I but the four heavenly kings who shoot this arrow." Then he had a courtier named

Tomi no Ichihito let fly the arrow. It traveled a great distance and struck Moriya in the chest. Hata no Kawakatsu¹⁴ rushed to the spot and severed Moriya's head from his body. This incident took place during the interval between Yomei's passing and Sushun's ascension to the throne.

After Sushun became thirty-third emperor, Prince Shotoku built Shitenno-ji temple, in which he placed the Thus Come One Shakyamuni's ashes. Umako erected a temple called Gango-ji, where he worshiped the image of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, which had been sent from Paekche. Here it must be pointed out in passing that the most appalling fraud in the world today is that of the statue of the Thus Come One Amida, allegedly the original object of devotion of Zenko-ji temple.¹⁵ It was because of their enmity toward Shakyamuni Buddha that the three emperors as well as the members of the Mononobe clan perished. Prince Shotoku had an image of Shakyamuni Buddha cast and enshrined it in Gango-ji. This is the object of devotion now enshrined in Tachibana-dera¹⁶ temple. It was the first statue of Shakyamuni Buddha ever to be made in Japan.

In China in the seventh year of Yung-p'ing (C.E. 64), the second emperor of the Later Han dynasty, Emperor Ming, dreamed of a man of gold.¹⁷ He thereupon dispatched eighteen emissaries, including the scholars Ts'ai Yin and Wang Tsun, to India to seek Buddhism. As a result, in the tenth year of Yung-p'ing, cyclical sign *hinoto-u*, two sages of central India, Kashyapa Matanga and Chu Fa-lan, were brought to China and accorded the highest esteem. Thousands of adherents of Confucianism and Taoism, schools that had up until then presided over all imperial rites, resented this and lodged a complaint with the emperor. The emperor decreed that an open debate be

held on the fifteenth day of the first month in the fourteenth year of Yung-p'ing. Overjoyed, the Taoists erected an altar for a hundred Chinese deities as their objects of devotion. The two sages from India had as their objects of devotion the Buddha's ashes, a painting of Shakyamuni Buddha, and five sutras.¹⁸

As was customary in their rituals performed before the emperor, the Taoists brought in the scriptures of their school, as well as the *Three Records*, the *Five Canons*, and the writings of the two sages¹⁹ and the Three Kings, piled some of them with firewood, and set them ablaze. In similar rites in the past these books had always withstood the flames, but this time they were reduced to ashes. Others, which were placed in water, had previously floated on the surface, but now sank to the bottom. The Taoists called out for demons to appear, but to no avail. Unbearably humiliated, Ch'u Shan-hsin, Fei Shu-ts'ai, and others died of shame. When the two Indian sages preached Buddhism, the Buddha's ashes ascended to heaven and there radiated a light so brilliant that it eclipsed the sun. The Buddha in the painting emitted a light from between his eyebrows. More than six hundred Taoists, including Lü Hui-t'ung,²⁰ finally capitulated and entered the Buddhist priesthood. Within thirty days of this confrontation they built ten temples of Buddhism.

Thus Shakyamuni Buddha is perfectly just in administering reward and punishment. As I mentioned earlier, because the three emperors and the two subjects²¹ became enemies of the Thus Come One Shakyamuni, they lost their lives and fell into the evil paths in their next existence.

Our own age is not unlike theirs. The Taoists Ch'u and Fei of China, and Moriya in Japan, by relying on the major and minor deities of their respective countries, became enemies of Shakya-

muni Buddha. But since these gods themselves follow the Buddha, those practitioners were all brought to ruin. These present times are exactly like theirs. The image I mentioned earlier that came from Paekche is that of Shakyamuni Buddha. Nevertheless, priests of the other schools have deceived the Japanese people by calling it Amida Buddha. In other words, they have replaced Shakyamuni with another Buddha. There is a difference between the Taoists and Moriya on the one hand and our contemporary priests on the other in that the former preferred gods to a Buddha while the latter have replaced one Buddha with another. However, they are alike in that they all abandoned Shakyamuni Buddha. There is no doubt, therefore, that our country will be ruined. This is a teaching that has never yet been revealed. Keep it strictly to yourself.

If there are any among my followers who are weak in faith and go against what I, Nichiren, say, they will meet the same fate as did the Soga family. I will tell you the reason. It was due to the efforts of father and son, Soga no Iname and Umako, that Buddhism came to be established in Japan. They could have held the same position as Brahma and Shakra at the time of the Thus Come One Shakyamuni's appearance in this world. Because they had brought Mononobe no Okoshi and his son Moriya to ruin, they became the only influential clan in the country. They rose in rank and controlled the nation, and their family enjoyed high prosperity. But Umako grew so arrogant that he had Emperor Sushun assassinated and many princes killed. Moreover, his grandson, Iruka,²² had his retainers put twenty-three of Prince Shotoku's children to death. Thereupon Empress Kogyoku, following the advice of Nakatomi no Kamako, had a statue cast of Shakyamuni Buddha and prayed to it fervently. As a result, Iruka,

his father, and the entire Soga family all perished at once.

Draw your own conclusions from what I said above. Those among my followers who fail to carry through their faith to the end will incur punishment even more severe. Even so, they should not harbor a grudge against me. Remember what fate Sho-bo, Noto-bo,²³ and others met.

Be extremely cautious, and for the time being never submit yourself to writing a pledge, whatever it may concern. No matter how furiously a fire may rage, it burns out after a while. On the other hand, water may appear to move slowly, but its flow does not easily vanish. Since you are hot-tempered and behave like a blazing fire, you will certainly be deceived by others. If your lord coaxes you with soft words, I am sure you will be won over, just as a fire is extinguished by water. Untempered iron quickly melts in a blazing fire, like ice put in hot water. But a sword, even when exposed to a great fire, withstands the heat for a while, because it has been well forged. In admonishing you in this way, I am trying to forge your faith.

Buddhism is reason. Reason will win over your lord. No matter how dearly you may love your wife and wish never to part from her, when you die, it will be to no avail. No matter how dearly you may cherish your estate, when you die, it will only fall into the hands of others. You have been prosperous enough for all these years. You must not give your estate a second thought. As I have said before, be millions of times more careful than ever.

Since childhood, I, Nichiren, have never prayed for the secular things

of this life but have single-mindedly sought to become a Buddha. Of late, however, I have been ceaselessly praying for your sake to the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni Buddha, and the god of the sun, for I am convinced that you are a person who can inherit the soul of the Lotus Sutra. Be extremely careful not to come into conflict with others. Do not meet anyone at any place other than your own house. None of the night watchmen²⁴ are sufficiently dependable, but considering that they had their residences confiscated because of their faith in the Lotus Sutra, you should, under ordinary circumstances, maintain friendly relations with them. Then they will exercise extra caution on their nightly rounds and provide you with protection. Even should the people on your side make a slight error, pretend not to see or hear it.

Even if your lord should ask to hear the teachings of Buddhism, do not heedlessly rejoice and rush off to see him. Answer mildly that you are not sure that you can comply, and that you will consult with some of my disciples. If you betray great joy in your countenance and allow yourself to be drawn in by his desire to hear the teachings, you will bring everything to ruin as surely as fire consumes whatever will burn, or as rain falls from heaven.

If the opportunity arises, submit to your lord the petition²⁵ I have written on your behalf. Since it contains matters of great import, it will certainly create a stir.

Respectfully,
Nichiren

To Shijo Kingo



Background

Around the third year of Kenji (1277), when this letter was written, Shijo Kingo was in great personal danger, having incurred the wrath of his lord Ema. Lord Ema's antagonism toward Shijo Kingo dated back to the Kuwagayatsu Debate, which took place in the sixth month, 1277. Taking advantage of their discord, Kingo's colleagues were watching for a chance to do away with him. In response to Kingo's report on the plight in which he was placed, Nichiren Daishonin wrote a petition to Lord Ema on Kingo's behalf, explaining what had happened at the Kuwagayatsu Debate and the relative

superiority of the Buddhist teachings.

In the present letter, the Daishonin clarifies the difference between Buddhism and government. Reward and punishment are means that a government employs to pursue its goals, while there is no such conscious manipulation in the world of Buddhism. Buddhism, based on an absolute Law, means victory or defeat—in other words, happiness or unhappiness—depending on whether one supports it or opposes it. In the last part of the letter, the Daishonin strongly advises Kingo to take great care to avoid being attacked by his enemies.

Notes

1. The Hero of the World is another name for the Buddha, so called because he valiantly confronts all sufferings and leads all people to enlightenment. The "Parable of the Phantom City" chapter of the Lotus Sutra reads, "World hero without peer, you who adorn yourself with a hundred blessings, you have attained unsurpassed wisdom."

2. Land of the Moon: (Chin Yüeh-chih) A name for India used in China and Japan. In the late third century B.C.E., there was a tribe called Yüeh-chih who ruled a part of India. Since Buddhism was brought from India to China via this territory, the Chinese seem to have regarded the land of the Yüeh-chih (moon tribe) as India itself.

3. "The moon appears in the west" refers to the fact that the new moon is first seen in the west just after sunset. Of course, the moon rises in the east and sets in the west each day just as the sun and stars do, but because its orbital motion is from west to east, it appears to move incrementally in retrograde, from west to east, each day.

4. A kind of plantain. The ivory plant is so called because its petals are large and ivory in color. In the Nirvana Sutra, it is said to grow with the sound of thunder.

5. Paekche was one of three kingdoms on the Korean Peninsula. It flourished from the mid-fourth through the mid-seventh century. Though the Daishonin indicates

that Paekche was in a subordinate relationship to Japan, scholars today, with access to a greater variety of historical documents than were available in the Daishonin's time, believe that the relationship was actually one of cooperation and exchange. Paekche is perhaps best known for introducing Buddhism to Japan, but it was also responsible for providing much of the support that allowed Japan to successfully adopt continental civilization.

6. The Great Minister Iname is Soga no Iname (d. 570), a court official who engaged in a struggle for power with the Chief Minister Mononobe no Okoshi, leader of the conservative faction at court. Iname's daughters became consorts of Emperor Kimmmei, and one of them gave birth to Emperor Yomei, father of Prince Shōtoku.

7. Nakatomi no Kamako is thought to have been a leading figure of the Nakatomi clan. Details about him are unknown. (Different from his namesake mentioned in n. 22.)

8. A place in Asuka Village, Nara.

9. The imperial palace was struck by lightning.

10. Yuge no Moriya is Mononobe no Moriya (d. 587), a court official who continued the opposition to Buddhism. He was also called Mononobe no Yuge no Moriya because his mother's clan was Yuge.

11. Nakatomi no Katsumi (d. 587) was a military leader of the Yamato period and an opponent of Buddhism. He was killed by Tomi no Ichih, a retainer of Prince Shotoku.

12. Toyokuni (n.d.) was a naturalized priest from the Korean kingdom of Paekche.

13. The great deity refers here to Futsu no Mitama no Okami, the deity of Isonokami Shrine at Futsu, Nara, who was revered by the Mononobe family as their clan deity.

14. Hata no Kawakatsu (n.d.) was a courtier who won the trust of Prince Shotoku. It is said that, after the prince's death, he built Hachioka-dera (also called Koryu-ji) temple in honor of his memory.

15. Zenko-ji is a temple affiliated with the Tendai and Pure Land schools in what is now Nagano Prefecture. According to the documents of this temple, the statue originally enshrined there was the one sent by King Syöngmyöng to Emperor Kimmei. The documents claim that this statue was transported to Nagano by Honda Zenko, and enshrined in 642 at a temple which was to become Zenko-ji. However, *The Chronicles of Japan* says that the image sent by the king was one of Shakyamuni. It is conceivable that, with the rise of the Pure Land school, the original image was replaced by a statue of Amida Buddha.

16. A temple in Asuka in Nara, said to have been built by Prince Shotoku. It is now affiliated with the Tendai school.

17. This refers to the tradition that Emperor Ming (28-75) dreamed of a golden man levitating above the garden. He awakened and asked his ministers about the dream. One of them said that he had once heard of the birth of a sage in the western region during the reign of King Chao of the Chou dynasty and that this sage had been called the Buddha. The emperor sent eighteen envoys to the western region in order to obtain the Buddha's teachings. And at the request of these envoys, two Indian Buddhist monks came to China in C.E. 67 with Buddhist scriptures and images

on the backs of white horses.

18. Sutras translated into Chinese by Chu Fa-lan and Kashyapa Matanga, including the Sutra of Forty-two Sections.

19. Two of the Five Emperors, T'ang Yao and Yü Shun.

20. Lü Hui-t'ung was a Taoist in the Later Han dynasty. According to *The Record of the Lineage of the Buddha and the Patriarchs*, he and other Taoists converted to Buddhism when they were defeated in debate in the presence of Emperor Ming in 71.

21. The three emperors are Kimmei, Bidatsu, and Yomei. The two subjects are Mononobe no Moriya and Nakatomi no Katsumi.

22. Soga no Iruka (d. 645), a court official of the Yamato period. In the age of Empress Kogyoku (r. 642-645), he seized the reins of government and perpetrated various atrocities. In 643 he forced Prince Yamashiro no Oe, a son of Prince Shotoku, to commit suicide and thereafter was able to manage affairs of state as he pleased. However, he was finally killed by Naka no Oe, who was to become Emperor Tenji, and Nakatomi no Kamako (Fujiwara no Kamatari), whereupon his father, Emishi, set fire to his own house and burned to death.

23. Sho-bo and Noto-bo were disciples of Nichiren 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, and finally turned against him. Noto-bo is said to have lost his faith around 1271.

24. The night watchmen are thought to have been Shijo Kingo's escorts, who lived in his residence. Their estates were confiscated because of their belief in the Daishonin's teachings.

25. The petition refers here to *The Letter of Petition from Yorimoto* written by the Daishonin on the twenty-fifth day of the sixth month, 1277, to Lord Ema on behalf of Shijo Kingo, explaining the falsity of the charges that had been made against him. This petition was kept by Kingo and in the end not submitted to the lord.