

A Father Takes Faith



AS I had not heard from you in a long time, I was feeling quite anxious. Nothing could be more wonderful than this matter between Tayu no Sakan¹ and yourself. It is indeed marvelous!

We read in the sutras that it is customary that, when an age begins to decline, sages and worthies all seclude themselves from the world, and only slanderers, flatterers, smiling backstabbers, and those of crooked principles fill the land. To illustrate, when the water level drops, the pond is disturbed, and when the wind blows, the sea is never still. We also read that, when the latter age begins, and when droughts, epidemics, and great rains and winds come in succession, even the large-hearted become narrow, and even those who seek the way adopt erroneous views. Consequently, the sutras say that father and mother, husband and wife, and elder and younger brothers will be at odds with each other, like hunter and deer, cat and mouse, or hawk and pheasant—to say nothing of relations with strangers. Priests possessed by the heavenly devil, such as Ryokan and the others, deceived your father, Saemon no Tayu, and tried to destroy you and your brother, but you, having a wise heart, heeded Nichiren's admonitions. Therefore, just as two wheels support a cart, or two legs carry a person, just

as two wings enable a bird to fly, or just as the sun and moon aid all living beings, the efforts of you brothers have led your father to take faith in the Lotus Sutra. It is wholly due to you, Hyoe no Sakan, that matters have worked out this way.

According to the teachings of the true sutra, when the latter age has begun and Buddhism has fallen into complete disorder, a great sage will appear in the world. For example, the pine tree, which withstands the frost, is called the king of trees, and the chrysanthemum, which continues to bloom after other plants have withered, is known as a sacred plant. When the world is at peace, worthies are hard to distinguish. It is when the age is in turmoil that both sages and fools come into view. How pitiful that Hei no Saemon and the lord of Sagami failed to heed me! If they had, they would surely not have beheaded the envoys from the Mongol empire who arrived a few years ago. No doubt they regret it now.

The great ruler Emperor Antoku, the eighty-first sovereign, commissioned several hundred teachers of the True Word school, including the Tendai chief priest, Myoun, to offer prayers in an attempt to subdue the General of the Right Minamoto no Yoritomo. But their curses "rebounded upon the originator,"² as the sutra says. Myoun

was beheaded by Yoshinaka,³ and Emperor Antoku drowned in the western sea.⁴ The eighty-second, eighty-third, and eighty-fourth sovereigns, that is, the Retired Emperor of Oki, the Retired Emperor of Awa, and the Retired Emperor of Sado, as well as the reigning emperor⁵—these four rulers had the Tendai chief priest and Administrator of Priests Jien, and forty or more other eminent priests, including those of Omuro⁶ and Mii-dera temples, offer prayers to subdue the Taira general Yoshitoki.⁷ But again, the curses “re-bounded upon the originator,” and the above-mentioned four rulers were banished to various islands.

Concerning this great evil teaching [of the True Word school]: The three great teachers—Kobo, Jikaku, and Chisho—violated Shakyamuni Buddha’s golden words that the Lotus Sutra is supreme, interpreting them to mean that the Lotus Sutra ranks second or third and the Mahavairochana Sutra ranks highest. Because the rulers put their trust in these distorted views, they destroyed both the nation and themselves in this life and are destined to fall into the hell of incessant suffering in the next.

This next special prayer ritual will be the third. Those among my disciples

who have already passed away are probably now observing this with their Buddha eye. And those whose lives have been prolonged, watch with your own eyes! The ruler and other high-ranking officials will be captured and carried off to a foreign land, and those who conducted the prayer ritual will either die insane, or end up in a foreign land, or hide themselves in the mountains and forests. The messenger of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, has twice been paraded through the streets,⁸ and his disciples and other supporters have been thrown into prison, killed, injured, or driven from the provinces where they lived. Therefore, the guilt of those offenses will unfailingly extend to each one of the inhabitants of those provinces. Also, people will be afflicted with white leprosy, black leprosy, or all kinds of other terribly grave illnesses.⁹ My disciples, understand the reasons for this.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The ninth day of the ninth month

Although this letter is specifically intended for you, it should in general be shown to all my followers. Do not tell others about it.



Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter at Minobu in the ninth month of the third year of Kenji (1277)—1278 according to another source—to Ikegami Hyoe no Sakan Munenaga, the younger of the two Ikegami brothers, expressing his joy at the conversion of Munenaga’s father, Saemon no Tayu Yasumitsu. For many years, Yasumitsu had stubbornly opposed his sons’ belief, attempting to divide the two by twice disowning the

elder brother, Munenaka, and promising to make Munenaga his heir if he would forsake the Daishonin’s teaching. Throughout this ordeal, Munenaka stoutly refused to abandon his faith, but Munenaga wavered from time to time. However, thanks to the Daishonin’s repeated letters of encouragement, he was able to resist Yasumitsu’s demands and make a firm commitment in faith. Now that the two brothers have

at last overcome their father's opposition and persuaded him to embrace the Lotus Sutra, Nichiren Daishonin warmly congratulates Munenaga in particular, praising his decision to remain true to his faith and to his elder brother.

As the postscript indicates, however, this letter was intended not only for Munenaga but for all the Daishonin's followers. Its more general content begins with the passage "According to the teachings of the true sutra, when the latter age has begun and Buddhism

has fallen into complete disorder, a great sage will appear in the world." This refers to the "Supernatural Powers" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, where Shakyamuni Buddha transfers the essence of the Lotus Sutra to Bodhisattva Superior Practices to be propagated in the Latter Day of the Law. The essence of the Lotus Sutra, or the Mystic Law, spreads and flourishes even in the evil Latter Day, when other Buddhist teachings fall into decline.

Notes

1. Tayu no Sakan is another name for Ikegami Munenaka, the elder of the Ikegami brothers.

2. Lotus Sutra, chap. 25. In the sutra, the sentence reads in the future tense. It was changed here to fit the context of this letter.

3. Minamoto no Yoshinaka (1154–1184), a general who assisted Yoritomo in his revolt against the Taira clan.

4. Antoku, still a child at the time, drowned in 1185 during a sea battle at Dannoura, where the Taira met their final defeat at the hands of the Minamoto.

5. In 1221, three retired emperors—Gotoba, Tsuchimikado, and Juntoku—together with the reigning emperor Chukyo, joined in an attempt, led by Gotoba, to overthrow the military government in Kamakura. Their forces were defeated by those of the Kamakura regent Hojo Yoshitoki, under the leadership of his eldest son, Yasutoki. Chukyo was deposed; Gotoba was exiled to the island of Oki; Tsuchimikado, to Awa (a different Awa from the Daishonin's birthplace); and Juntoku, to Sado Island.

6. Omuro is another name for Ninna-ji temple in Kyoto.

7. Hojo Yoshitoki (1163–1224), the second regent of the Kamakura shogunate, who crushed Gotoba's uprising in 1221, thereby extending the power of the shogunate over all of Japan. Since the Hojo were descended from a branch of the Taira clan, he was called the Taira general, though both he and his father had supported Minamoto no Yoritomo in his campaign to overthrow Taira domination.

8. The Daishonin refers to the events of the twelfth day of the ninth month, 1271, when he was arrested and nearly beheaded. Seized by Hei no Saemon's men at his dwelling in Matsubagayatsu, he was first led through the streets of Kamakura to the office of advisers to the regent, where he was sentenced to exile on Sado Island. Then, however, instead of placing him in the custody of the Sado governor, his captors led him across Wakamiya Avenue to the execution grounds at Tatsunokuchi.

9. Chapter 28 of the Lotus Sutra describes the karmic retribution that results from slander by stating that those who disparage a believer in the sutra will contract white leprosy in their present lifetime.