

The Third Doctrine



I HAVE read through your letter. In it, you report that you said, “The ninth volume of *The Annotations on ‘The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra’* states, ‘Freeing oneself from the [threefold] world by means of the provisional teachings is termed an ephemeral liberation.’” To which the priest Ryosho-bo¹ replied, “There is no such passage.” Yet (in the section that deals with the “Life Span” chapter), the ninth volume of *On “The Words and Phrases”* does indeed say: “From the passage ‘There is no one who emerges from the ephemeral . . .’ to the passage ‘The ephemeral teachings of the past were expounded for the sake of the truth,’² [the meaning of the text is that] freeing oneself from the world by means of the provisional teachings is termed an ephemeral liberation. There are no people of the three vehicles who have not freed themselves from the threefold world, and no beings of the human and heavenly realms who have failed to escape the three evil paths. Yet these are both termed ephemeral liberation.”

The ninth volume of *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra* reads, “There is no one who emerges from the ephemeral and yet fails to enter into the true. Therefore, we know that the ephemeral teachings of the past were expounded for the sake of the truth.”

The “Life Span” chapter states:

“Good men, the Thus Come One observes how among living beings there are those who delight in inferior teachings, meager in virtue and heavy with defilement. . . . Because living beings have [different natures, . . . I preach different doctrines. . . . This, the Buddha’s work], I have never for a moment neglected.”³ T’ien-t’ai and Miao-lo are commenting on this passage. In this passage of the sutra, all the teachings, from the Flower Garland Sutra, which was expounded immediately after the Buddha’s enlightenment and which combines both specific and perfect teachings,⁴ to the fourteen chapters that comprise the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra, are termed “inferior teachings.” Those who delight in them are called people “meager in virtue and heavy with defilement,” and the liberation achieved through them is shown to be an ephemeral liberation.

This being the case, concerning the Flower Garland school, which relies on the Flower Garland Sutra; the Dharma Characteristics school, which upholds the Profound Secrets Sutra; the Three Treatises school, which is based upon the Wisdom sutras; the True Word school, which relies on the Mahavairochana Sutra; the Pure Land school, which cherishes the Meditation Sutra; and the Zen school, which upholds the Lankavatara Sutra, as well as all

the other various schools, which rely on their respective sutras—even if their adherents read and recite the sutra their school relies on just as that sutra teaches, they will neither free themselves from the threefold world nor escape the three evil paths. Even less will those who term these sutras true teachings, or who claim that they surpass the Lotus Sutra! They are like people spitting at the heavens or pounding at the earth in rage.

With respect to this doctrine: After the passing of the Thus Come One, in India for more than fifteen hundred years, the Buddha's twenty-four successors such as Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu knew of it but did not reveal it. In China for more than a thousand years, others did not know of it; only T'ien-t'ai and Miao-lo gave a rough account of it. However, it seems that they did not explain its true significance. And the same was true of the Great Teacher Dengyo. Now when I, Nichiren, consider the matter, I find that, in addition to the above passage of the Lotus Sutra, the Nirvana Sutra states: "If there are those who possess differing ideas concerning the three treasures, then truly you should know that these people can no longer hope to take refuge in, or rely upon, the three pure treasures. They will never gain benefit from any of the precepts, and in the end, they will fail to obtain the fruits of the voice-hearer, the cause-awakened one, or the bodhisattva."⁵ This passage is clearly referring to [the essential point of] the "Life Span" chapter of the Lotus Sutra. It subsequently likens the "Life Span" chapter to a tree, and the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings and the theoretical teaching, to its shade.⁶ This appears again in the Nirvana Sutra. It is saying that the benefits of the five periods and eight teachings, of the teachings that are still in a certain dimension and that extend beyond,⁷ and of the Mahayana and Hinayana are all like shade, while the doc-

trine of the essential teaching is like a tree. It is also saying that the benefits gained from the teachings expounded before the "Life Span" chapter by those who lived during the Buddha's lifetime are like a tree's shade in the darkness, for such benefits were obtainable only by those who had already heard the "Life Span" chapter in prior existences.⁸

As for your opponent's contention that disbelief does not in itself constitute slander, or his claim that those who disbelieve will not necessarily fall into hell, the fifth volume of the Lotus Sutra states, "If with regard to this sutra one should harbor doubt and fail to believe, one will fall at once into the evil paths."⁹

On the whole, you should bear the following in mind. In contrasting the Lotus Sutra with the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings and evaluating their relative superiority and depth, the comparison between the teachings still in a certain dimension and those extending beyond may be carried out on three levels.¹⁰ Nichiren's teaching represents the third doctrine. Though the first and second doctrines have been spoken of in the world rather vaguely, like a dream, the third has never been spoken of at all. Though T'ien-t'ai, Miao-lo, and Dengyo explained it to some extent, they did not clarify it fully. In the end, they left it for now, the Latter Day of the Law. This is the time referred to as the fifth five-hundred-year period.

However, I was given no information about this doctrinal debate. Ryoshobo is a person of vast learning. If he had remarked, "I am sorry to have to say this, but I am already well aware of the existence of that passage," and had somehow managed to frustrate you, claiming that our side had been defeated, I wonder what you could have done about it. Anyway, setting aside the fact that he and his fellow priests were ignorant of that passage of commentary, his having said that it does not exist in any

of the sixty volumes¹¹ is due to the rep-
rimand of heaven. His offense of slan-
dering the correct teaching became
apparent when he encountered an emis-
sary of the Lotus Sutra. Moreover, this
affair of the debate surely occurred for
some reason. Please find out in detail
what Ota Jiro Hyoe of Kajima, Daishin-
bo, and the chief priest of the main tem-
ple¹² are saying. Matters such as these
are described in detail in the sutra. The
votary of the Lotus Sutra is certain to
be obstructed by the devil king of the
sixth heaven. Among the ten objects of
meditation, this corresponds to the ob-
ject of diabolical functions.¹³ It is the
way of the devil to delight in obstruct-
ing good and in causing the production
of evil. Concerning those whom he
cannot force to perform evil acts, he is
helpless and is capable only of allowing
them to create good. Those who carry
out the practices of the two vehicles, he
hates unreservedly; he urges them to
perform a lesser good. Those who car-
ry out the practices of the bodhisattva,
he hinders by encouraging in the direc-
tion of the practice of the two vehicles.
And lastly, if there is someone who prac-
tices the pure and perfect teaching ex-
clusively, he will topple that person into
the perfect teaching that is combined
with the specific teaching.¹⁴ You may
refer to the eighth volume of *Great Con-
centration and Insight*.

You say that Ryosho-bo further
claimed that a practitioner of concen-
tration and insight should keep the pre-
cepts. However, the ninth volume of
Words and Phrases restrains practitioners
of the first, second, and third [of the
five stages of practice] from upholding
the precepts. This is also clear from the
text of the sutra itself.¹⁵ The discrep-
ancy in *Great Concentration and Insight* is
explained by Miao-lo in the form of
questions and answers.¹⁶ See volume
nine of *On "The Words and Phrases."*

There are two kinds of practitioners
at the initial stage of rejoicing. Practi-
tioners of keen faculties may keep the
precepts, while those of dull faculties
are restrained from doing so. Moreover,
there are differences among the For-
mer, Middle, and Latter Days of the
Law, and differences between the prac-
tices of shoju and shakubuku. You
should also take into account the Great
Teacher Dengyo's remark about a tiger
in the marketplace.¹⁷

From now on, you need not hold
debates in Shimosa. Having defeated
the priests Ryosho-bo and Shinen-
bo,¹⁸ were you to debate with others, it
would only dilute the effect. I hear that
these priests have been slandering me
for some years now. These mosquitoes
and gadflies, as it were, are such fools
that they groundlessly revile Nichiren,
who is like the lion king, when they
have neither listened to nor seen him.
For persons of the Tendai Lotus school
to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo them-
selves and yet give their approval when
others repeat the Nembutsu would be
strange enough. Yet not only do they
fail to remonstrate with them, but they
criticize one who does confront the
Nembutsu school, which is strange in-
deed! As for Daishin-bo, as I wrote you
before, please strongly admonish him by
letter. It would appear that he has been
brought back to our faith by the ten
demon daughters. It would also seem
that a messenger from the devil king had
possessed him, but now has parted com-
pany with him. It cannot possibly be a
lie when the sutra states that "evil de-
mons will take possession of others."¹⁹
There is much that I would like to say,
but the messenger is in a hurry, so I am
writing this at night.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The first day of the tenth month

Background

This letter was written at Minobu in the tenth month of the third year of Kenji (1277) to Toki Jonin, a leading figure among the believers in Shimosa Province, in response to Toki's report of his encounter in debate with Ryoshobo, a prominent local priest of the Tendai school. In his reply, the Daishonin comments on the points raised in the debate and provides additional clarification for future reference.

Evidently, Toki had gained an unexpected advantage in the debate when his opponent proved himself ignorant of a passage in Miao-lo's *Annotations on "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra"* to the effect that one cannot attain true liberation through the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings. This passage represents Miao-lo's annotation on another passage from T'ien-t'ai's *Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*, which in turn is commenting on a passage from the "Life Span" chapter of the Lotus Sutra. In the first part of his reply, the Daishonin cites all three passages and explains their essential meaning. The pre-Lotus Sutra teachings, he says, are all

expedient means preached solely in order to lead people to the Lotus Sutra, and the benefits of those teachings depend on the teaching of the sutra's "Life Span" chapter.

The Daishonin also draws on a traditional standard of doctrinal comparison, that of the teachings still in a certain dimension and the teachings extending beyond, to further illustrate his point. This comparison, he says, may be carried out on three levels. From the viewpoint of the third and final level of comparison, even the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra is considered to be a teaching still belonging to a certain dimension, while only the supreme Law implied in the depths of the "Life Span" chapter is viewed as extending beyond. This third level corresponds to the "third doctrine," from which this writing takes its name. The third doctrine also indicates the supreme Law, that is, the original seed of enlightenment, which the Daishonin revealed for the first time in the Latter Day as Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

Notes

1. Ryoshobo (b. 1213) was the head of a Tendai seminary in Shimosa Province. He is said to have contributed to the rise of interest in Tendai studies in the Kanto area.

2. The original text of *The Annotations on "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra"* as quoted here contains the parenthetical instruction that the Chinese character meaning "for the sake of" is to be pronounced in the falling tone. Read with a different tone in the Chinese language, it would yield a different meaning. This and similar instructions in the text have been omitted in translation.

3. In essence, in the passage designated, Shakyamuni Buddha declares that, because the beings were of limited capacity, he did not immediately reveal the eternity of his Buddhahood, but rather taught that he had

renounced the world in his youth and attained enlightenment later. In accordance with the varying dispositions of the beings, he preached expedient, provisional teachings, all aimed at leading people to realize the truth contained in the "Life Span" chapter.

4. According to the T'ien-t'ai system of doctrinal classification, the teachings of the Flower Garland period combine the specific teaching with the perfect teaching. Only the Lotus Sutra represents the pure perfect teaching.

5. This passage criticizes those who deny the eternity of the three treasures of the Buddha, the Law, and the Buddhist Order; it is in essence a restatement of the doctrine set forth in the "Life Span" chapter.

6. In the Nirvana Sutra, the tree is used to represent the eternal Buddha. Since the eternity of the Buddha's life is revealed in the "Life Span" chapter, the Daishonin compares the "Life Span" chapter to the tree.

7. Teachings still in a certain dimension are partial doctrines expounded in a particular context for people of a particular capacity, while those that extend beyond are more complete and profound.

8. Those who had already heard the "Life Span" chapter in past existences had thereby received the seed of enlightenment. Thus on their being reborn together with Shakyamuni Buddha in India and hearing the teachings he preached in preparation for the "Life Span" chapter, this seed was nourished and developed, and they received benefits.

9. Lotus Sutra, chap. 15.

10. The first level of comparison defines the Lotus Sutra as being superior to the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings; the second defines the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra as being superior to the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra; and the third defines the Buddhism of the Mystic Law as being superior to the essential teaching. The third level corresponds to the "third doctrine," which also means the Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

11. The sixty volumes refer to T'ien-t'ai's three major works, *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*, *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*, and *Great Concentration and Insight*, consisting of ten volumes each, along with Miao-lo's commentaries on these works, *The Annotations on "The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra,"* *The Annotations on "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra,"* and *The Annotations on "Great Con-*

centration and Insight," also consisting of ten volumes each.

12. The identity of the chief priest of the main temple is uncertain. This may refer to the chief priest of the temple where Ryosho-bo was residing temporarily.

13. The object of diabolical functions refers to the fifth of the ten objects. By meditating upon them, the practitioner gains insight into how they work to hinder enlightenment. See also ten objects in Glossary.

14. In other words, the devil will lure that person away from the Lotus Sutra and toward the Flower Garland Sutra.

15. The Daishonin refers here to the passages from the "Distinctions in Benefits" chapter upon which the five stages of practice are based.

16. *Great Concentration and Insight* enjoins strict observance of the precepts and thus appears to contradict both the above-mentioned passage from *Words and Phrases* and the "Distinctions in Benefits" chapter on which that passage is based. In his *On "The Words and Phrases,"* Miao-lo explains that *Words and Phrases* is referring to those believers in the Lotus Sutra who are in the initial stages of practice, and *Great Concentration and Insight*, to those who have advanced to later stages.

17. *The Treatise on the Lamp for the Latter Day of the Law.* It reads: "If in the Latter Day of the Law there should be persons who keep the precepts, that would be something rare and strange, like a tiger in the marketplace. Who could possibly believe it?"

18. Shinen-bo was a Tendai priest who lived in Shimosa Province. Little is known about him.

19. Lotus Sutra, chap. 13.