

Letter to Misawa



PLEASE tell the people of Suruga that they should unite firmly in faith.¹

I have received your offerings of a hundred mandarin oranges, kelp, laver, dark green seaweed, and other produce that you took the trouble to send me in this remote mountainous place. I have also received the quilted robe made by the lay nun Utsubusa.

I have carefully examined the points you raised in your letter, and I understand. Although the people who study Buddhism outnumber the dust particles of the land, those who actually become Buddhas are fewer than the specks of dirt that can be placed on a fingernail. This the World-Honored One of Great Enlightenment clearly states in the Nirvana Sutra. On reading it, I wondered why it should be so difficult, but after some thought I realized that indeed it must be so. Although people study Buddhism, it is difficult for them to practice it correctly either because of the ignorance of their minds, or because, even though wise, they fail to realize that they are being misled by their teachers.

Moreover, even though one may encounter a wise teacher and the true sutra and thereby embrace the correct teaching, when one resolves to break free from the sufferings of birth and death and attain Buddhahood, one will inevitably encounter seven grave mat-

ters known as the three obstacles and four devils, just as surely as a shadow follows the body and clouds accompany rain. Even if you should manage to overcome the first six, if you are defeated by the seventh, you will not be able to become a Buddha.

Let us leave the first six for now. The seventh is caused by the devil king of the sixth heaven. When an ordinary person of the latter age is ready to attain Buddhahood, having realized the essence of all the sacred teachings of the Buddha's lifetime and understood the heart of the important teaching set forth in *Great Concentration and Insight*, this devil is greatly surprised. He says to himself, "This is most vexing. If I allow this person to remain in my domain, he not only will free himself from the sufferings of birth and death, but will lead others to enlightenment as well. Moreover, he will take over my realm and change it into a pure land. What shall I do?" The devil king then summons all his underlings from the threefold world of desire, form, and formlessness and tells them: "Each of you now go and harass that votary, according to your respective skills. If you should fail to make him abandon his Buddhist practice, then enter into the minds of his disciples, lay supporters, and the people of his land and thus try to persuade or threaten him.

If these attempts are also unsuccessful, I myself will go down and possess the mind and body of his sovereign to persecute that votary. Together, how can we fail to prevent him from attaining Buddhahood?"

I, Nichiren, have long been aware of all this and therefore know how difficult it is for an ordinary person of the latter age to become a Buddha in this lifetime. The sutras describe in many places how Shakyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment, and the obstacles he suffered because of the devil king of the sixth heaven seem absolutely unbearable. The fiendish acts of Devadatta and of King Ajatashatru were due solely to the workings of that devil. The Lotus Sutra says, "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?"² An ordinary person like Nichiren would not be able to bear any of the tribulations the World-Honored One of Great Enlightenment underwent for a single day or even for a single moment, let alone all the various persecutions that befell him during a period of fifty years or more. Moreover, it is taught that in the latter age persecutions will be a hundred, thousand, ten thousand, million times greater than those in the Buddha's lifetime. I wondered how I could possibly withstand them. A sage, however, is said to be capable of predicting what will occur in the future. With regard to the three existences, an understanding of the future is the mark of a true sage. I may not be a sage, but I have for some time known that Japan would in our day bring ruin upon itself [because of its attachment to erroneous teachings].

I knew that, if I dared to say this openly, then surely I must be the votary of the Lotus Sutra who the Buddha prophesied would appear in the future age that he was describing when he said, "How much more will this be

so after his passing?" But if, though knowing what the future holds, I were to remain silent, I would be condemned to be born a mute or a stutterer in lifetime after lifetime. I myself would become a great enemy of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, and a traitor to the ruler of Japan. After death, I would fall into the great citadel of the hell of incessant suffering. For years, therefore, I have continually admonished myself that, even though I might lack food or clothing, or be rebuked by my parents, brothers, teacher, and colleagues, or be persecuted by the ruler and all the people, if I were going to waver even in the slightest on that account, I would have done better never to have spoken out in the first place.

During the past countless kalpas, I may have met the Lotus Sutra several times and aroused the aspiration for enlightenment. However, while I may have been able to bear one or two difficulties, I must have given up when faced with a succession of great obstacles. In this life, I knew that if I were truly resolved to withstand the harshest trials then I must speak out. This I did, and I encountered great persecutions one after another, just as the sutra predicts.

My resolution is now immovable. Determined to endure any hardship, I have fulfilled the Buddha's prediction, and I have not the slightest doubt. Now I am living here in this mountain forest. Even if you should abandon your faith in the Lotus Sutra, how could I regard as strangers the people who, if only for a day or even for a moment, have helped me survive? Never have I cared what happens to me personally. I promised that, no matter what might befall me, I would maintain my faith without regressing, and if I became a Buddha, I would lead all of you to enlightenment. You have less knowledge of Buddhism than I, and moreover, you are lay believers with lands, wives and

children, and retainers. Therefore, it may be extremely difficult for you to sustain your faith throughout life. This is why I have always told you that, because of your position, it would be better to feign ignorance of this teaching. No matter what may happen in the future, be assured that I will never forsake or neglect you.

As for my teachings, regard those before my exile to the province of Sado as equivalent to the Buddha's pre-Lotus Sutra teachings. I had thought that, if the ruler of this country desired to govern well, he would summon the priests of the True Word school for an open debate with me, and that on that occasion I would reveal a matter of truly supreme importance. Before my exile, I withheld this even from my disciples for fear that if I should tell them, even in confidence, they might inadvertently disclose it to the True Word priests, who would then avoid the debate. This is why I refrained from revealing it to each one of you as well.

Then on the night of the twelfth day of the ninth month in the eighth year of Bun'ei (1271), I was very nearly beheaded at Tatsunokuchi. From that time, I felt pity for my followers because I had not yet revealed this true teaching to any of them. With this in mind, I secretly conveyed my teaching³ to my disciples from the province of Sado. After the Buddha's passing, great scholars and teachers such as Mahakashyapa, Ananda, Nagarjuna, Vasubandhu, T'ien-t'ai, Miao-lo, Dengyo, and Gishin knew this teaching, but kept it in their hearts and did not express it in words. The reason was that the Buddha had forbidden them to spread it, stating, "After my passing, this great Law should not be revealed until the Latter Day of the Law arrives."⁴ I may not be an envoy sent by the Buddha, but my appearance in this world coincides with the age of the Latter Day. Moreover, quite unexpect-

edly, I came to realize this teaching, which I now expound to prepare the way for a sage.⁵

With the appearance of this teaching, all the teachings advocated by the scholars and teachers of Buddhism during the Former and Middle Days of the Law will be like stars after sunrise, or an awkward apprentice beside a skilled craftsman. It is stated that, once this teaching is revealed in this era, the Buddha images as well as the priests of the temples built in the Former and Middle Days will all lose their power to benefit people, and only this great teaching will spread throughout the entire land of Jambudvipa. Since all of you have a bond with this teaching, you should feel reassured.

Utsubusa came a long distance to visit me despite her advanced age, but since I was told that it was merely a casual visit on her way back from the shrine to the god of her ancestors, I would not see her, although I pitied her greatly. Had I permitted her to see me, I would have been allowing her to commit slander against the Lotus Sutra. The reason is that all gods are subjects, and the Lotus Sutra is their lord. It is against even the code of society to visit one's lord on the way back from calling on one of his subjects. Moreover, Utsubusa is a lay nun and should have the Buddha foremost in mind. Because she made this and other mistakes as well, I refused to see her. She was not the only one, however. I refused to see many others who stopped by to visit me on their return from the hot spring resort at Shimobe.⁶ Utsubusa is the same age that my parents would be. I feel deeply sorry to have disappointed her, but I want her to understand this point.

After you came here to see me the year before last, I received word—true or not, I do not know—that you were ill, and I wanted to send a messenger to inquire after you. But my disciples said

that, much as they understood how I felt, they advised against it, as it might embarrass you. Therefore, I abandoned the idea, acknowledging that such is the way of the world. I thought that if you were really ill you would inform me through a messenger, since you have always been sincere and faithful. I did not hear from you, however, so I myself deliberately refrained from inquiring after you, although I have been anxious about you all this time. Impermanence is the way of all things, but last year and this year the world has seen such great turmoil that I wondered if I could ever see you again. Just when I was longing to hear from you, your letter arrived. Nothing could have given me greater pleasure. Please tell the lay nun Utsubusa about all that I have written here.

I would like to explain further about my teaching, but this letter is already too long. Earlier I mentioned the Zen, Nembutsu, and Precepts schools. But of the many schools of Buddhism, the True Word is the very teaching that brought ruin upon China and will destroy Japan as well. Not only were six priests—the Tripitaka masters Shan-wu-wei, Chin-kang-chih, and Pu-k'ung, and the great teachers Kobo, Jikaku, and Chisho—confused as to the relative superiority of the Lotus Sutra and the three True Word sutras such as the Mahavairochana, but the first three Tripitaka masters also made objects of devotion representing the two [Diamond and Womb] realms and misled people to believe that these mandalas had originated in India. Being so deceived, the three great teachers learned the True Word doctrines, brought them to Japan, and spread them throughout the land, to everyone from the ruler on down to the common people. Emperor Hsüan-tsung of China lost his empire because of the True Word

doctrines, and Japan is also steadily declining. The Retired Emperor of Oki, who served as the eighty-second emperor, was robbed of his power by the Kamakura government despite Great Bodhisattva Hachiman's oath⁷ to protect one hundred successive rulers. This misfortune was solely the result of prayers offered by eminent priests who followed the three great teachers mentioned above on behalf of the imperial court. These prayers "rebounded upon the originator."⁸

Because the Kamakura shogunate attacked this evil doctrine and the evil men who espoused it, it might have ruled our land for eighteen generations more, until its one hundredth ruler, in accordance with the oath of Great Bodhisattva Hachiman. However, it has now turned to the men of the same evil doctrine it once opposed. Therefore, as Japan no longer has a ruler worthy of protection, Brahma, Shakra, the gods of the sun and moon, and the four heavenly kings have reached a decision and ordered a foreign country to threaten Japan. They have also dispatched the votary of the Lotus Sutra as their envoy. The ruler, however, does not heed his warnings. On the contrary, he sides with the priests, thus creating chaos in both the secular realm of government and the religious realm of Buddhism. As a result, he has become a formidable enemy of the Lotus Sutra. And as his slander has long continued, this country is on the verge of ruin.

Today's epidemic is no less than the harbinger of a great war that is to come. How pitiful, how tragic!

Nichiren

The twenty-third day of the second month

Letter to Misawa

Background

Written in the fourth year of Kenji (1278), this letter is also referred to as *Before and after Sado* because it makes a clear distinction between the teachings the Daishonin expounded before his exile to Sado Island and those during and after his Sado exile. He compares the former to the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings, which Shakyamuni preached as an expedient to lead his disciples to the Lotus Sutra. Concerning his true teaching, the Daishonin says, "I secretly conveyed my teaching to my disciples from the province of Sado." Quoting the Buddha's words, he refers to that teaching simply as "this great Law." More precisely, this teaching was explained in two of his most important

writings, *The Opening of the Eyes* and *The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind*.

The recipient of this letter is generally believed to be Misawa Kojiro, a lay follower of the Daishonin who was the lord of Misawa in Fuji District of Suruga Province, though some consider it given to Kojiro's grandson, Masahiro.

Misawa appears to have kept his distance from the Daishonin for fear of antagonizing and arousing the suspicions of the Kamakura shogunate. But the Daishonin expresses understanding of his position as the lord of a manor responsible for a fief, family, and retainers, and kindly encourages him.

Notes

1. It is somewhat unusual for an exhortation of this kind to appear at the very beginning of a letter. It may well have been that Nichiren Daishonin intended it as a postscript, but placed it here because of the lack of space at the end of the letter.

2. Lotus Sutra, chap. 10.

3. This indicates two important writings, *The Opening of the Eyes*, completed in the second month of 1272, and *The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind*, written in the fourth month of 1273.

4. This is not an actual quotation, but rather the expression of the Daishonin's view of what various passages in the Lotus Sutra mean.

5. A "sage" here indicates Bodhisattva Superior Practices, whom Shakyamuni Buddha entrusted with the mission of propagating the Mystic Law in the Latter Day, as stated in the "Supernatural Powers" chapter of the Lotus Sutra. In several of his writings,

the Daishonin refers to himself in humble terms as the forerunner of Bodhisattva Superior Practices.

6. A spa located about seven km north-east of Minobu in present-day Yamanashi Prefecture.

7. Hachiman is said to have made an oath during the reign of the fifty-first sovereign, Emperor Heizei (r. 806–809), to the effect that he would protect the nation until the reign of the hundredth sovereign.

8. 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. The Daishonin cites this passage to indicate that the Retired Emperor of Oki, or the ex-emperor Gotoba (1180–1239), relied on the prayers of the True Word school to overturn the Kamakura government, but suffered a loss and was exiled to the island of Oki.