

On Prolonging One's Life Span



THESE are two types of illness: minor and serious. Early treatment by a skilled physician can cure even serious illnesses, not to mention minor ones. Karma also may be divided into two categories: fixed and unfixed. Sincere repentance will eradicate even fixed karma, to say nothing of karma that is unfixed. The seventh volume of the Lotus Sutra states, "This sutra provides good medicine for the ills of the people of Jambudvīpa."¹ These words can be found in no other sutra. All the sacred teachings of Shakyamuni's lifetime are the golden words of the Thus Come One; for countless kalpas, they have never contained the slightest falsehood. The Lotus Sutra is the truth of all truths taught by the Buddha, for it includes his declaration of "honestly discarding expedient means."² Many Treasures Buddha confirmed the truth of the Lotus Sutra, and all the other Buddhas lent their tongues in testimony. How, then, could it be false? Moreover, this sutra contains the greatest of all secrets. It tells of a woman who suffers from illness in the last five-hundred-year period of the twenty-five hundred years following the Buddha's passing.

King Ajatashatru broke out in virulent sores all over his body on the fifteenth day of the second month of his fiftieth year. Not even the skills of the

great physician Jivaka were enough to cure him. It was fated that he would die on the seventh day of the third month and fall into the great citadel of the hell of incessant suffering. All the pleasures of his fifty years suddenly vanished, and the sufferings of an entire lifetime were gathered into twenty-one days. His death was predetermined by his fixed karma. But then the Buddha reiterated the teaching of the Lotus Sutra, entitling it the Nirvana Sutra and conferring it on the king. The king immediately recovered from his illness, and the grave offenses that had burdened his heart vanished like dew-drops.

More than fifteen hundred years after the Buddha passed away, there lived a man [in China] called Ch'en Chen.³ It was prophesied that he would die at the age of fifty, but by following the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai, he was able to prolong his life by fifteen years and lived to be sixty-five. Bodhisattva Never Disparaging also transformed his fixed karma and prolonged his life through his practice of the Lotus Sutra. The sutra says, "His life span was increased."⁴ The persons mentioned above were men, not women, but they prolonged their lives by practicing the Lotus Sutra. Ch'en Chen lived before the last five-hundred-year period, so his change of karma was as extraordinary as

rice ripening in winter or chrysanthemums blossoming in summer. In this age, it is as natural for a woman to change her fixed karma by practicing the Lotus Sutra as it is for rice to ripen in fall or chrysanthemums to bloom in winter.

When I prayed for my mother, not only was her illness cured, but her life was prolonged by four years. Now you too have fallen ill, and as a woman, it is all the more timely for you to establish steadfast faith in the Lotus Sutra and to see what it will do for you. In addition, you can go to Nakatsukasa Saburo Saemon-no-jo [Shijo Kingo], who is not only an excellent physician but a votary of the Lotus Sutra.

Life is the most precious of all treasures. Even one extra day of life is worth more than ten million *ryo* of gold. The Lotus Sutra surpasses all the other sacred teachings of the Buddha's lifetime because of the "Life Span" chapter. The greatest prince in the land of Jambudvipa would be of less consequence than a blade of grass if he died in childhood. If he died young, even a person whose wisdom shone as brilliantly as the sun would be less than a living dog. So you must hasten to accumulate the treasure of faith and quickly conquer your illness.

I could ask Shijo Kingo on your behalf, but, while some people would prefer to be approached by an intermediary, others may feel it reflects a lack of earnestness on the part of the individual concerned. It is extremely difficult to fathom another person's mind. I have experienced such difficulties on several occasions. Shijo Kingo is one who would feel offended if the request came from anyone but the person directly concerned, so in his case, it would not be advisable for me to intercede. Just ask his assistance yourself,

frankly and sincerely, without an intermediary. When he came to see me in the tenth month of last year, he told me how grieved he was about your illness. He said that you were probably not overly concerned then because your illness was not yet serious, but that it would surely become critical by the first or second month of this year. His words deeply saddened me. He also said that Toki depends on you as a staff to lean on and a pillar for support. He was very concerned about you. He is a man who never gives in to defeat and who greatly values his friends.

If you are unwilling to make efforts to heal yourself, it will be very difficult to cure your illness. One day of life is more valuable than all the treasures of the major world system, so first you must muster sincere faith. This is the meaning of the passage in the seventh volume of the Lotus Sutra that states that burning a finger as an offering to the Buddha and the Lotus Sutra is better than donating all the treasures of the major world system.⁵ A single life is worth more than the major world system. You still have many years ahead of you, and moreover you have encountered the Lotus Sutra. If you live even one day longer, you can accumulate that much more benefit. How truly precious your life is!

Write down your name and age yourself and send your messenger with it to me so that I can pray to the gods of the sun and moon. Your son Iyo-bo⁶ is also extremely worried about you, so he will offer the recitation of the verse section of the "Life Span" chapter to those gods.

Respectfully,
Nichiren

Reply to the lay nun

Background

Nichiren Daishonin sent this letter in 1279 to the lay nun Toki, the wife of Toki Jonin, whom she had married after her first husband died. When Toki Jonin became a lay priest, she became a lay nun, calling herself Myojo (Wonderful Eternity).

This letter explains the principle of changing karma or destiny. Buddhism characterizes karma as either fixed or unfixed, depending on whether the time when one is to receive the reward or retribution from that karma is fixed. Both types may be either good or bad. Unfixed karma has a weaker influence and can be overridden through simple effort. Fixed karma is more deeply rooted and harder to change. It is the

determining force of the basic tendency of one's life. Fixed karma may also be interpreted as karma whose effects are destined to appear at a fixed time (Ajatashatru, for example, was destined to die on the seventh day of the third month).

While Buddhist scriptures describe a variety of causes of karma, the Daishonin's Buddhism teaches that the deepest causes are one's support or slander of the Mystic Law. These causes lie deep within one's life, beyond the ability to sense or conceive. Nevertheless, *On Prolonging One's Life Span* asserts positively that strong faith and sincere repentance can change even fixed karma.

Notes

1. Lotus Sutra, chap. 23.
2. Ibid., chap. 2.
3. Ch'en Chen (n.d.) was an elder brother of T'ien-t'ai and a general of the Ch'en dynasty.
4. Lotus Sutra, chap. 20.
5. This statement is based on a passage

in chapter 23 of the Lotus Sutra.

6. Iyo-bo is another name for Nitcho (1252–1317), one of the Daishonin's six senior priest-disciples. He was either Toki Jonin's adopted son or his wife's son by her first husband.