

The One-eyed Turtle and the Floating Log



THE “Peaceful Practices” chapter in the fifth volume of the Lotus Sutra states, “Manjushri, as for this Lotus Sutra, throughout immeasurable numbers of lands one cannot even hear its name.”

This passage means that we living beings, transmigrating through the six paths of the threefold world, have been born sometimes in the world of heavenly beings, other times in the world of human beings, and still other times in the worlds of hell, hungry spirits, and animals. Thus we have been born in immeasurable numbers of lands where we have undergone innumerable sufferings and occasionally enjoyed pleasures, but have never once been born in a land where the Lotus Sutra has spread. Or even if we happened to have been born in such a land, we did not chant *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*. We never dreamed of chanting it, nor did we ever hear others chant it.

To illustrate the extreme rarity of encountering this sutra, the Buddha likened it to the difficulty of a one-eyed turtle encountering a floating sandalwood log with a hollow in it. The essence of this analogy is as follows. Eighty thousand *yojanas* down, on the bottom of the ocean, lives a large sea-creature called a turtle. He has neither limbs nor flippers. His belly is as hot as heated iron, but the shell on his back

is as cold as the Snow Mountains. What this turtle yearns for day and night, morning and evening—the desire he utters at each moment—is to cool his belly and warm the shell on his back.

The red sandalwood tree is regarded as sacred and is like a sage among people. All other trees are regarded as ordinary trees and are like foolish people. The wood of this sandalwood tree has the power to cool the turtle’s belly. The turtle longs with all his might to climb onto a sandalwood log and place his belly in a hollow there in order to cool it, while exposing the shell on his back to the sun in order to warm it. According to the laws of nature, however, he can rise to the ocean’s surface once every thousand years. But even then it is difficult for him to find a sandalwood log. The ocean is vast, while the turtle is small, and floating logs are few. Even if he finds some floating logs, he seldom encounters one of sandalwood. And even when he is fortunate enough to find a sandalwood log, it rarely has a hollow the size of his belly. If [the hollow is too large and] he falls into it, he cannot warm the shell on his back, and no one will be there to pull him out. If the hollow is too small and he cannot place his belly in it, the waves will wash him away, and he will sink back to the ocean’s floor.

Even when, against all odds, the turtle comes across a floating sandalwood log with a hollow of the right size, having only one eye, his vision is distorted, and he sees the log as drifting eastward when it is actually drifting westward. Thus the harder he swims in his hurry to climb onto the log, the farther away he goes. When it drifts eastward, he sees it as drifting westward, and in the same way, he mistakes south for north. Thus he always moves away from the log, never approaches it.

In this way, the Buddha explained how difficult it is for a one-eyed turtle to find a floating sandalwood log with a suitable hollow, even after immeasurable, boundless kalpas. He employed this analogy to illustrate the rarity of encountering the Lotus Sutra. One should be aware, however, that, even if one should encounter the floating sandalwood log of the Lotus Sutra, it is rarer still to find the hollow of the Mystic Law of the daimoku, which is difficult to chant.

The ocean represents the sea of the sufferings of birth and death, and the turtle symbolizes us living beings. His limbless state indicates that we are poorly endowed with roots of goodness. The heat of his belly represents the eight hot hells of anger and resentment, and the cold of the shell on his back, the eight cold hells of covetousness and greed. His remaining at the bottom of the ocean for a thousand years means that we fall into the three evil paths and find it hard to emerge. His rising to the surface once every thousand years illustrates how difficult it is to be born as a human being from the three evil paths once in immeasurable kalpas at a time when Shakyamuni Buddha has appeared in the world.

Other floating logs, such as those of pine or cypress, are easy to find, but a sandalwood log is difficult to encounter. This illustrates that it is easy

to encounter all the other sutras, but difficult to encounter the Lotus Sutra. And even if the turtle should come across a floating sandalwood log, finding one with a suitable hollow is difficult. This means that, even if one should encounter the Lotus Sutra, it is difficult to chant the five characters of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo that are its essence.

The turtle mistakes east for west and north for south. Similarly, though we flaunt our knowledge and act as if we were wise, we ordinary people regard superior teachings as inferior and inferior teachings as superior. We regard powerless teachings as ones that lead to enlightenment, and declare teachings inappropriate for the people's capacity to be appropriate for them. Thus we believe that the teaching of the True Word school is superior and the Lotus Sutra is inferior, and that the former suits the people's capacity, but the latter does not.

So consider well what I have just related. The Buddha made his advent in India and preached various sacred teachings during his lifetime. In his forty-third year of preaching he began to expound the Lotus Sutra. For eight years thereafter, all his disciples embraced the Lotus Sutra, which is like a wish-granting jewel. But Japan is separated from India by two hundred thousand *ri* of mountains and seas, so that the people here could not even hear the name of the Lotus Sutra.

Twelve hundred and more years after the passing of Shakyamuni Buddha, the Lotus Sutra had been brought to China, but still had not been transmitted to Japan. Fifteen hundred and more years after his passing, Buddhism was introduced for the first time to Japan from the Korean kingdom of Paekche during the reign of Emperor Kimmei, Japan's thirtieth ruler. Moreover, in the seven hundred years that have passed since Prince Jogu first had Buddhism intro-

duced from China, the Lotus Sutra and all the other sutras have been propagated widely, so that, from the ruler on down to the common people, those who are perceptive have come to embrace either the entirety, one volume, or one chapter of the Lotus Sutra in order to repay their debt to their parents. Thus they believe that they are truly embracing the Lotus Sutra. But they have never chanted Nam-myoho-enge-kyo aloud, and though they appear to believe in the Lotus Sutra, in fact, they are far from believing in it.

It is as if the one-eyed turtle, having found the sacred sandalwood that is difficult to encounter, were to fail to put his belly into the hollow. If he were to fail to do so, he would have encountered the sandalwood to no purpose, and he would instantly sink back to the bottom of the ocean.

In these more than seven hundred years, the Lotus Sutra has spread widely in our country, and those who read, teach, make offerings to, or embrace this sutra are more numerous than rice and hemp seedlings or bamboo plants and rushes. None of them, however, ever chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo in the same way that they call on the name of the Buddha Amida, nor do any of them urge others to chant it. To read the various sutras or call upon the names of the various Buddhas is like the turtle encountering a log of ordinary wood. As long as it is not sandalwood, it fails to cool the turtle's belly. As long as it is not the sun, it fails to warm the shell on his back. Such teachings merely please the eye and gladden the heart, but bring no benefit. They are like plants that blossom but bear no fruit, or words that are never put into practice.

I alone first chanted Nam-myoho-enge-kyo in Japan. In the more than twenty years since the summer of the fifth year of the Kencho era (1253),¹ I alone have been chanting Nam-myoho-

enge-kyo day and night, morning and evening. Those who chant the Nembutsu number ten million. I have no support from anyone in authority, while the allies of the Nembutsu have power and are of noble birth. However, when a lion roars all the other beasts are silenced, and a dog is terrified by a tiger's shadow. When the sun rises in the eastern sky, the light of all the stars fades completely.

The invocation of Amida Buddha's name has exerted influence where the Lotus Sutra has not spread. But once the invocation of Nam-myoho-enge-kyo has been raised, the Nembutsu will become like a dog cowering before a lion, or the light of the stars paling before the sun. The daimoku and the Nembutsu are as unlike as a hawk and a pheasant. That is why the four kinds of Buddhists all view me with jealousy, and why everyone, both high and low, feels hatred for me. Those who make groundless accusations against me fill the country, and the wicked abound in the land. Therefore, people choose what is inferior and detest what is superior. It is as though one were to assert that a dog is braver than a lion, or that the stars appear brighter than the sun. Thus my bad reputation as a man of erroneous views has spread far and wide, so that in one way or another I have been falsely accused, vilified, attacked by swords and staves, and exiled repeatedly. All these persecutions coincide perfectly with the passage in the fifth volume of the Lotus Sutra.² For that reason, tears spring to my eyes and joy fills my entire body.

Here I have neither clothing sufficient to cover my body nor provisions enough to survive. I live like Su Wu, who sustained himself by eating snow while he lived among the northern barbarians, or like Po I, who subsisted on ferns while living on Mount Shouyang. Who other than my parents would trouble to visit me in such a

place? Were it not for the protection of the three treasures, how could I sustain my life for a single day, or even for a moment? I can only marvel that you so frequently send a messenger to me, when we have never even met. The fourth volume of the Lotus Sutra states that Shakyamuni Buddha will assume the form of an ordinary person in order to make offerings to the votary of the Lotus Sutra.³ Could it be that Shakyamuni Buddha has entered your body, or were your roots of goodness from the past aroused?

A woman known as the dragon

king's daughter achieved Buddhahood through faith in the Lotus Sutra; she therefore pledged to protect women who embrace this sutra in the latter age. Could it be that you are related to her? How admirable!

Nichiren

The twenty-sixth day of the third month in the second year of Koan (1279), cyclical sign *tsuchinoto-u*

Reply to the wife of the late Matsuno



Background

This letter was written at Minobu to the wife of the late lay priest Matsuno Rokuro Saemon who lived at Matsuno in Ihara District of Suruga Province. Their daughter had married Nanjo Hyoe Shichiro, and gave birth to nine children, among them Nanjo Tokimitsu. The lay priest and his wife are thought to have been converted to the Daishonin's Buddhism through their relationship with the Nanjo family. Matsuno Rokuro Saemon died in 1278, the year before this letter was written.

At that time, disasters were frequent, and in particular, the famine that persisted through the autumn and winter of 1278 created untold misery. Despite this hardship, however, Matsuno's wife made frequent offerings to the Daishonin. She appears to have done so even though she had not met him personally, and she continued to serve him in this way after her husband's death. In praise of her sincere faith the Daishonin says, "Could it be that Shakyamuni Buddha has entered your body, or were your roots of goodness from the past aroused?"

In this letter, Nichiren Daishonin

first cites a passage from the "Peaceful Practices" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, which states how difficult it is to encounter the Lotus Sutra. Then he relates the story of the one-eyed turtle. The Daishonin elaborates on the story, explaining in detail the difficulty of a one-eyed turtle finding a floating piece of sandalwood with a hollow in it the turtle can fit into perfectly. Through this story, he shows how rare it is to meet the Lotus Sutra, and even more so to encounter the Law of Nam-myohorenge-kyo that is the sutra's essence.

Next the Daishonin traces the introduction of the Lotus Sutra from India to China and then to Japan. Although many people in Japan claim to embrace the Lotus, he says, "None of them, however, ever chant Nam-myohorenge-kyo . . . nor do any of them urge others to chant it." Thus, although people think that they believe in the Lotus Sutra, they do not embrace it correctly.

The final part of this letter refers to the Daishonin's tenacious struggles during the more than twenty years since he first proclaimed Nam-myohorenge-kyo.

renge-kyo. The Daishonin himself underwent all the persecutions that the Lotus Sutra says its votary in the Latter Day will face. Few people made any attempt to understand his teachings and many harassed him in various ways. This opposition, however, served only to

strengthen his conviction that he was indeed the votary of the Lotus Sutra, whose activities are predicted in the “Encouraging Devotion” chapter. The letter concludes with praise for the sincerity of Matsuno’s wife.

Notes

1. Nichiren Daishonin chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo for the first time at Seicho-ji temple in Awa Province on the twenty-eighth day of the fourth month, 1253, thus proclaiming the establishment of his teaching. According to the lunar calendar, the fourth month is the first month of summer.

2. The “passage in the fifth volume of the Lotus Sutra” refers here to a passage from the verse section of the “Encouraging Devotion” chapter that predicts that the votaries of the Lotus Sutra will face the three powerful enemies.

3. This is based on a passage in the “Teacher of the Law” chapter.