

On Establishing the Four Bodhisattvas as the Object of Devotion



I HAVE received one white quilted robe, one gray priest's robe, one surplice of the same color, and one thousand coins. I have no words to adequately express my gratitude for your long-standing devotion. I look forward to the day when we can meet and I can say all that is in my heart.

In your letter you asked: "You have told me that an object of devotion should be made of Shakyamuni Buddha of the essential teaching, who attained enlightenment in the remote past, attended by the four bodhisattvas who sprang from the earth and who have been his disciples since that remote past. If this is correct, when is such an object of devotion to be established?"

To reply, more than two thousand years have already passed since the Buddha's demise. During this period, Buddhism has spread throughout the entire land of Jambudvīpa, especially in India, China, and Japan, to such an extent that monks are as numerous as rice and hemp plants, and doctrines as plentiful as bamboo and reeds. Not a single temple in those three countries, however, has ever made an object of devotion of Shakyamuni Buddha of the essential teaching flanked by the bodhisattvas who are his original disciples. Such a thing has never been heard of before. Those who built the tens of thousands of temples in Japan did not

know that they should have made an object of devotion of the lord of teachings and his attendants in the essential teaching. Prince Jōgu founded Shintennō-ji, the first Buddhist temple in Japan, but he established as its object of devotion a statue of Amida Buddha, flanked by bodhisattvas such as Perceiver of the World's Sounds, and made images of the four heavenly kings. The Great Teacher Dengyō built Enryaku-ji temple, but he enshrined an image of the Buddha of the Eastern Region¹ in the main hall as the object of devotion. He made no object of devotion of the lord of teachings who attained enlightenment in the remote past and the attendants who have been with him since then. I have never heard of such an object of devotion in any of the seven major temples in Nara, let alone in the temples of the countryside.

Since I had doubts about the matter, I consulted passages of the Lotus Sutra, and they reveal why this object of devotion has not yet appeared. The sutra clearly states that it should not be established before the predicted age of quarrels and disputes² in the Latter Day of the Law. Those Buddhist scholars and teachers who appeared in this world during the Former and Middle Days of the Law did not establish this object of devotion because they honored the Buddha's prohibition. Had an object of

devotion of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, who attained enlightenment in the remote past and his attendants ever been made during the Former and Middle Days, it would have been like the sun appearing at night or the moon shining during the day. Because Bodhisattva Superior Practices would certainly appear and establish this object of devotion in the first five hundred years of the Latter Day, those four ranks of scholars and teachers³ who appeared during the Former and Middle Days did not even describe it in words. Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu knew of it in their hearts, but did not speak about it to others. The Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai Chih-che also knew of it, but as he was a bodhisattva of the theoretical teaching,⁴ though he taught it in part, he did not expound its true meaning. He taught it indistinctly, like the cry of a cuckoo that one hears just before waking from a dream. Other Buddhist teachers did not say so much as a single word about it. For at Eagle Peak, Shakyamuni Buddha strictly prohibited those scholars and teachers who were bodhisattvas of the theoretical teaching, and who would appear during the two thousand years of the Former and Middle Days of the Law, from disclosing prior to the Latter Day of the Law even indirectly anything about Shakyamuni Buddha of the essential teaching, who attained enlightenment in the remote past, and the four Bodhisattvas of the Earth led by Superior Practices, who have accompanied him ever since.

Now that we have entered the Latter Day of the Law, an object of devotion should be made of the original Buddha flanked by his original attendants, since, according to the Buddha's golden words, this is the most appropriate time. Because this age corresponds to the predicted time, the Bodhisattvas of the Earth will appear soon and establish an object of devotion of the four

bodhisattvas. Now is truly the proper time. That is why the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai longed for this age, saying, "In the last five-hundred-year period, the mystic way will spread and benefit humankind far into the future,"⁵ and why the Great Teacher Dengyo yearned for this time, saying, "The Former and Middle Days are almost over, and the Latter Day is near at hand. Now indeed is the time when the one vehicle of the Lotus Sutra will prove how perfectly it fits the capacities of all people."⁶

From a mundane view, I am the poorest person in Japan, but in the light of Buddhism, I am the wealthiest person in all Jambudvīpa. When I consider that this is all because the time is right, I am overwhelmed with joy and cannot restrain my tears. It is impossible to repay my debt of gratitude to Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings. Perhaps even the rewards of the Buddha's twenty-four successors are inferior to mine, and even those of the great teachers such as T'ien-t'ai Chih-che and Dengyo cannot approach mine. That is because now is the time to establish the object of devotion of the four bodhisattvas.

Question: Have you any passages of proof that the four bodhisattvas should be established as an object of devotion?

Answer: The "Emerging from the Earth" chapter of the Lotus Sutra reads, "Among these bodhisattvas were four leaders. The first was called Superior Practices, the second was called Boundless Practices, the third was called Pure Practices, and the fourth was called Firmly Established Practices."

Question: Are there any passages from the sutras that limit the establishment of this object of devotion to the last five-hundred-year period?

Answer: The "Medicine King" chapter reads, "After I have passed into extinction, in the last five-hundred-year period you must spread it abroad

widely throughout Jambudvīpa and never allow it to be cut off.”

You also mentioned in your letter that the people connected with Ota Jomyo are apparently saying that the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra can in no way lead to enlightenment. They are making a serious mistake. Remember this about the theoretical and essential teachings of the Lotus Sutra: Which is shallow and which profound, which superior and which inferior, which lenient and which severe, and which subordinate and which primary must be judged in accordance with the time and the people’s capacity. There are three periods⁷ in which the sacred teachings of the Buddha’s lifetime should be propagated; the people’s capacity should be thought of in the same way.

In the first five hundred years of the Former Day of the Law following the Buddha’s passing, only Hinayana teachings spread, while in the next five hundred years, provisional Mahayana teachings spread. The thousand years of the Middle Day of the Law saw the rise of the theoretical teaching. In the beginning of the Latter Day of the Law, only the essential teaching spreads, but even so, the theoretical teaching should not be discarded. Nowhere in the entire Lotus Sutra do we find a passage suggesting that we should discard the first fourteen chapters, which comprise the theoretical teaching. When we distinguish between the theoretical and the essential teachings on the basis of the threefold classification of the entire body of the Buddha’s teachings, the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings were to be spread in the Former Day, and the theoretical teaching, in the Middle Day, but the Latter Day is the time to propagate the essential teaching. In the present period the essential teaching is primary, while

the theoretical teaching is subordinate. But those who therefore discard the latter, saying it is not the way to enlightenment, and believe only in the former, have not yet understood the doctrine of Nichiren’s true intention. Theirs is a completely distorted view.

This doctrine concerning the theoretical and essential teachings is not my own [but was expounded by the Buddha]. Those who would distort it can only be possessed by the heavenly devil, or Papiyas, and will topple others along with themselves into the great citadel of the hell of incessant suffering. How foolish they are! Teach this doctrine to others clearly as I have taught you these many years. Those who call themselves my disciples and practice the Lotus Sutra should all practice as I do. If they do, Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, Shakyamuni’s emanations throughout the ten directions, and the ten demon daughters will protect them. Yet, for all that, [some people associated with Ota Jomyo distort the teaching]. I cannot fathom what could be in their minds.

The priest Nichigyo’s death⁸ was indeed pitiful. I recited the Lotus Sutra and chanted Nam-myoho-enge-kyo for him here in Minobu, sincerely praying to Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and the Buddhas of the ten directions to receive him on Eagle Peak. I have not yet recovered from my illness, so I have written only briefly. I will write to you again.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The seventeenth day of the fifth
month in the second year of Koan
(1279)

Reply to Toki



Background

This letter was written at Minobu to Toki Jonin, a retainer of Lord Chiba, the constable of Shimosa Province.

The first part of this letter deals with a question Toki Jonin had asked about when the object of devotion composed of Shakyamuni Buddha who attained enlightenment in the remote past, flanked by the four bodhisattvas, would be established. The Daishonin had referred to this object of devotion in *The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind*, which he had addressed and sent to Toki in the fourth month of 1273. In this treatise the Daishonin describes the object of devotion as follows: “Myohorenge-kyo appears in the center of the tower with the Buddhas Shakyamuni and Many Treasures seated to the right and left, and, flanking them, the four bodhisattvas, followers of Shakyamuni, led by Superior Practices” (p. 366), and “At this time the countless Bodhisattvas of the Earth will appear and establish in this country the object of devotion, foremost in Jambudvipa, that depicts Shakyamuni Buddha of the essential teaching attending [the eternal Buddha]” (p. 376).

The object of devotion that the Daishonin describes in these quotations is the Gohonzon, on which Nam-myohorenge-kyo appears in the center, flanked by the two Buddhas, Shakyamuni and Many Treasures, who, in turn, are flanked by the four bodhisattvas. In *On Establishing the Four Bodhisattvas as the Object of Devotion*, however, the Daishonin refers to the Gohonzon as “an object of devotion should be made of Shakyamuni Buddha of the essential teaching,

who attained enlightenment in the remote past, attended by the four bodhisattvas who sprang from the earth and who have been his disciples since that remote past.”

Next, the Daishonin teaches that the Latter Day of the Law is the proper time to establish that object of devotion, and that the person who can establish it will appear without fail. In the light of Buddhism, he proceeds to say, he is the wealthiest person in the world. He makes this statement in terms of the time; that is, he has been born at exactly the time when the true object of devotion is to be established.

In the latter part of this letter, the Daishonin responds to news from Toki that some of the believers associated with Ota Jomyo have been saying that the theoretical teaching should be discarded. Apparently they thought that, since the theoretical teaching does not lead to enlightenment in the Latter Day, there was no need to recite the “Expedient Means” chapter. The Daishonin says that this is a serious misunderstanding, for the Lotus Sutra never repudiates the content of its first fourteen chapters. He explains that different teachings accord with different periods, and that the beginning of the Latter Day is the time when the essential teaching is to be spread. By this he means not the latter fourteen chapters of the Lotus Sutra, but Nam-myohorenge-kyo, the essence of the “Life Span” chapter. In this letter, the Daishonin clearly indicates that both the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” chapters should be read in prayer.

Notes

1. The Buddha of the Eastern Region is the Thus Come One Medicine Master.
2. The “predicted age of quarrels and disputes” refers to the last of the five five-

hundred-year periods following Shakyamuni Buddha’s death. In the Great Collection Sutra, the Buddha says, “Quarrels and disputes will arise among the adherents to my

teachings, and the pure Law will become obscured and lost." This age corresponds to the beginning of the Latter Day of the Law.

3. The "four ranks of scholars and teachers" refers to the Buddhist leaders who embraced and propagated Buddhism after Shakyamuni's passing, and whom people could rely upon to lead them to enlightenment. The scholars included Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu; the teachers, T'ien-t'ai and Dengyo.

4. T'ien-t'ai was regarded as the reincarnation of Bodhisattva Medicine King, the leader of the bodhisattvas who were taught by Shakyamuni as the historical Buddha born in India. This bodhisattva was entrusted with the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra, but not with the essential teaching, which reveals Shakyamuni's original enlightenment. T'ien-t'ai expounded the doctrine of three thousand realms in a sin-

gle moment of life based on the theoretical teaching, which regards Shakyamuni's enlightenment as having occurred in India. He did not expound the doctrine based on the essential teaching, that is, the doctrine of the Buddha's eternally enlightened life.

5. *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra.*

6. *An Essay on the Protection of the Nation.*

7. The Former, Middle, and Latter Days of the Law. These are three consecutive stages into which the time following a Buddha's death is divided.

8. Nichigyo was a disciple of the Daishonin, commonly known as Sammi-bo. Born in Shimosa Province, he was knowledgeable about Buddhism, but discarded his faith around the time of the Atsuhara Persecution. He died an untimely death.