

## Letter to the Lay Priest Nakaoki



I HAVE received the one thousand coins that you sent me and respectfully reported it in the presence of the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law.

The country of Japan is located in Jambudvīpa to the south of Mount Sumeru. Jambudvīpa measures seven thousand yojanas in both length and breadth. In it there are eighty-four thousand countries, namely, the five regions of India, sixteen great states, five hundred middle-sized states, and ten thousand small states, as well as countless smaller states scattered about like grains of millet and islands like particles of dust. All of these lands lie in the great ocean like fallen leaves floating here and there on a pond. Our country of Japan is a small island in the great sea. It was once so small that it would disappear from sight when the tide rose—becoming barely visible only when the tide ebbed—until the two deities<sup>1</sup> enlarged it to its present size. Its first human ruler was a great emperor named Jimmu. For some thirty reigns after him, neither a Buddha nor sutras nor priests existed in this country, only ordinary people and gods. Because there was no Buddhism, the people neither knew of hell nor aspired to the pure land. Even when death parted them from their parents or siblings, they had no idea what would become of the deceased. They

must have thought of death as something like the vanishing of dew, or like the setting of the sun and moon.

Then, during the reign of the thirtieth ruler, the great emperor Kimmei, King Syōngmyōng of Paekche, a state northwest of Japan, sent to this country a gilded bronze image of Shakyamuni Buddha, a set of sutras expounded by that Buddha, and several priests who were to read them to the people. However, the Buddha was a statue and not a living person, and the sutras bore no resemblance to non-Buddhist writings. The priests spoke, but no one could understand what they preached. Moreover, their appearance was neither that of men nor that of women. For all these reasons, the people were doubtful and dismayed. The ministers of the left and right met in the emperor's presence and discussed the matter from various angles. The opinion prevailed that Buddhism should not be adopted, so the statue of the Buddha was discarded and the priests were imprisoned.

Then, on the fifteenth day of the second month in the second year of Emperor Bidatsu's reign, Prince Shōtoku, son of Emperor Yomei, faced east and chanted "Namu Shakyamuni Buddha," whereupon the Buddha's relics materialized in his hand.<sup>2</sup> In the sixth year of Emperor Bidatsu's reign, the

prince read and recited the Lotus Sutra. Since then more than seven centuries have passed and more than sixty emperors have reigned, and Buddhism has gradually spread throughout Japan. Among the sixty-six provinces and the two islands,<sup>3</sup> there is no place where it has not reached. In every province, every district, and every town, village, and hamlet, Buddhist halls, pagodas, and temples have been built, and Buddhism now dwells in 171,037 places. Persons of wisdom as brilliant as the sun and moon have spread Buddhism in generation after generation, and worthies who shine like the myriad stars fill every province. For their own sakes, they practice the True Word doctrines, the Wisdom sutras, or the Benevolent Kings Sutra, or chant the name of Amida Buddha, or believe in Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds, Bodhisattva Earth Repository, or the three thousand Buddhas,<sup>4</sup> or read and recite the Lotus Sutra. But when they encourage the practice of ignorant priests and lay people, they merely say: "Just chant 'Namu Amida Butsu.' Suppose a woman has a child. If the child falls into a moat or a river, or if it is lonely, it will cry 'Mother! Mother!' Hearing this, the mother will never fail to set everything else aside and come to her child's aid. The same holds true with Amida Buddha. We are infants and he is our mother. So, if you fall into the pit of hell or the moat of hungry spirits, just chant 'Namu Amida Butsu,' and he will never fail to come save you—just as an echo follows a sound." This is what all these men of wisdom have always taught. Therefore, our country of Japan has long since followed the custom of chanting that phrase.

Now I am neither a resident of the capital, the center of the country, nor the son of a general on the frontiers. I am merely the son of a commoner from a remote province. But I chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, which not a

single person in Japan has ever chanted during the past more than seven hundred years. Moreover, I have declared that to chant the name of Amida Buddha as people do, revering him as they would their parents, the sun and moon, or their lords, feeling as though they had found a ship on which to make a crossing, water when they were thirsty, or food when they were hungry, creates the karma that will cause them to fall into the hell of incessant suffering. They were therefore as startled and resentful as if stones had been cooked in with their food; as if their horse had stumbled over a rock and bolted; as if a gale had begun to blow while they were crossing a body of water; as if a great fire had broken out in a populated area; as if they had suddenly been attacked by an enemy; or as if a courtesan had become an emperor's consort.

However, for twenty-seven years, from the twenty-eighth day of the fourth month in the fifth year of Kencho (1253) until now, the eleventh month of the second year of Koan (1279), I have not once retreated, but have continued to speak out all the more strongly—just as the moon waxes or as the tide rises. At first, when I alone chanted the daimoku, those who saw me, met me, or heard me covered their ears, glared at me with furious eyes, contorted their mouths, clenched their fists, and ground their teeth. Even my parents, brothers, teachers, and friends became my enemies. Then the steward and the lord of the manor<sup>5</sup> where I lived turned against me. Later the whole province was in an uproar, and eventually the entire populace grew alarmed. Meanwhile, some people began to chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo either to mimic or to mock me, or seemingly out of faith or seemingly to disparage me. Now one-tenth of the people in Japan chant only Nam-myoho-enge-kyo. The remaining nine-tenths are those who chant both the

daimoku and Amida Buddha's name, those who are wavering between the two, and those who chant only the Nembutsu. People of this last group revile me as though I were an enemy of their parents or their lord, or a sworn foe from a past existence. Heads of villages, districts, and provinces hate me as though I were a traitor.

As I continued to proclaim my teachings in this way, I was driven out of place after place, forced to move on throughout Japan like a log adrift on the sea at the wind's mercy, or like a tiny feather that soars high into the air and then hovers about, now rising, now falling. At times I was struck, arrested, wounded, or exiled far away. At times my disciples were killed, or I myself was banished. Then, on the twelfth day of the ninth month in the eighth year of Bun'ei (1271), I incurred the wrath of the government and was subsequently exiled to the northern island province of Sado.

Though I had never violated the secular laws even in the slightest, the authorities accused me, saying, "This priest has gone so far as to declare that the late lay priests of Saimyo-ji and Gokuraku-ji<sup>6</sup> have fallen into hell. He is worse than a traitor." They were about to behead me at a place called Tatsunokuchi in Kamakura in Sagami Province, but then they apparently reconsidered, thinking: "True, his crime is indeed heinous, but he is a votary of the Lotus Sutra nonetheless. If we kill him rashly, there is no telling what disaster might befall us. On the other hand, if we leave him on a remote island, he will surely perish of some cause or other. Not only is he hated by the ruler, but the common people all regard him as they would an enemy of their parents. He will probably be killed or die of hunger either on his way to Sado or after he has arrived there." Thus they decided to dispose of me in this way.

However, possibly due to the protection of the Lotus Sutra and the ten demon daughters, or perhaps because the heavenly gods realized my innocence, and although many of the islanders hated me, there was an old man called the lay priest Nakaoki no Jiro [who befriended me]. He was as wise as he was advanced in years, and he enjoyed robust health and commanded the esteem of the local people. Probably because this venerable man said of me, "This priest can be no ordinary person," his sons did not strongly resent me. Since most of the other people were in the service of the retainers of the Nakaoki family, they too made no attempt to harm me on their own authority and carefully obeyed the government's instructions.

Though water may be muddied, it will again become clear. Though the moon may hide behind the clouds, it will surely reappear. Similarly, in time my innocence became apparent, and my predictions proved not to have been in vain. Perhaps on that account, although the members of the Hojo family and influential lords insisted that I should not be pardoned, I was finally released from my sentence of exile at the sole decision of the lord of the province of Sagami<sup>7</sup> and returned to Kamakura.

I, Nichiren, am the most loyal subject in all of Japan. I do not believe that there has ever been, nor ever will be, anyone who can equal me in this respect. The reason I say so is as follows: When the great earthquake struck during the Shoka era (1257–1259) and the huge comet appeared in the first year of Bun'ei (1264), a number of wise persons, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, performed divinations, but they could neither determine the causes of these disasters nor foretell what was to come. As for me, I secluded myself in a scripture library, and after pondering the matters based on the Buddhist

teachings, I concluded that, because the people revere the priests of provisional Mahayana and Hinayana teachings, such as True Word, Zen, Nembutsu, and Precepts, and make light of the Lotus Sutra, the heavenly kings Brahma and Shakra would rebuke them by ordering a country in the west to attack Japan. I submitted a written warning to this effect to the lay priest of Saimyo-ji, now deceased. People of all religions scoffed at it and dismissed it, but nine years later, in the fifth year of Bun'ei, an official letter arrived from the great Mongol empire announcing its intention to attack Japan. Because my prediction had thus come true, the Nembutsu priests, True Word teachers, and others resented me and plotted against my life.

To give an analogy, in China, among the concubines of Emperor Hsüan-tsung, there was a beautiful woman known as the Lady of Shang-yang Palace. She was the greatest beauty in the empire. The emperor's consort, Yang Kuei-fei, saw her and thought, "If she is allowed to serve near the emperor, she will surely steal his favor away from me." So she forged an imperial edict and had the Lady's parents and brothers either banished or executed. The Lady herself was imprisoned and tortured for no less than forty years.

My own case is similar to this. "If Nichiren's warnings become widely known, the government will have to ask him to pray for the defeat of the great Mongol empire. And if Japan should in fact be victorious, he will become the foremost priest in this country. We, on the other hand, will lose our influence and prestige." So thinking, perhaps, the priests of the other schools brought false charges against me. Unaware of their motives, the regent believed their words and is now about to bring the nation to ruin.

In a similar way, the Second Emperor of the Ch'in dynasty of China,

instigated by Chao Kao's slanderous tongue, had Li Ssu executed, and later he himself perished at the hands of Chao Kao. And the emperor of Engi, prompted by the slanderous words of the minister Fujiwara no Tokihira, banished the minister Sugawara no Michizane.<sup>8</sup> Afterward the emperor fell into hell.

The present regent is just like these two emperors. He believes the words of the True Word teachers, the Zen school, the Precepts priests, the observers of the precepts, and the Nembutsu priests, all of them enemies of the Lotus Sutra, and treats me, Nichiren, with animosity. Although I am of lowly birth, I embrace the Lotus Sutra, which Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, the Buddhas of the ten directions, Brahma, Shakra, the gods of the sun and moon, the four heavenly kings, the dragon deities, the Sun Goddess, and Great Bodhisattva Hachiman protect and treasure, just as people cherish their own eyes, as the heavenly gods revere Shakra, or as a mother loves her child. Therefore, all these Buddhas and gods will punish those who persecute the votary of the Lotus Sutra, even more severely than one would chastise an enemy of one's parents, or than the ruler punishes rebels.

Now you two are the late lay priest Jiro's son and daughter-in-law. It is perhaps because you are the son and daughter-in-law of so profoundly wise a man that, following in his footsteps, you not only believe in the Lotus Sutra, which the ruler of the country himself rejects, but also provide for the votary of the Lotus Sutra, each year bringing me offerings and traveling a thousand ri<sup>9</sup> to see me. Moreover, on the thirteenth anniversary of the death of your infant daughter,<sup>10</sup> you erected a sixteen-foot wooden grave tablet with the seven characters Nam-myohorenge-kyo inscribed on it. When the north wind blows, it is said, fish in the

southern sea who are touched by it will be released from their sufferings; and when the wind comes from the east, birds and deer in the western mountains who come in contact with it will escape from the realm of animals and be born in the inner court of the Tushita heaven. How much greater still will be the blessings of those human beings who rejoice at this tablet, touch it with their hands, or gaze upon it with their eyes! I believe that because of the benefit derived from your erecting this wooden tablet, your deceased parents must be illuminating the path to the pure land as brilliantly as would the sun and moon in the heavens. Furthermore, you yourselves, their filial son and his wife, as well as your children, will live to be 120 in this existence,<sup>11</sup>

and after death you will be with your parents in the pure land of Eagle Peak. You should consider this to be as certain as the fact that the moon is reflected in clear water, or that a drum produces a sound when struck. Should you erect any wooden tablets in the future, be sure to have the daimoku of the Lotus Sutra inscribed on them as well.

Written at Mount Minobu.  
Nichiren

The thirtieth day of the eleventh month in the second year of Koan (1279), cyclical sign *tsuchinoto-u*

To the wife of the lay priest  
Nakaoki



## Background

This letter was written at Minobu to the lay priest Nakaoki and his wife, believers who lived at Nakaoki on the island of Sado. Though the present work is traditionally titled *Letter to the Lay Priest Nakaoki*, it is addressed to Nakaoki's wife. It would seem that Nichiren Daishonin wrote it for both of them when Nakaoki came to visit him at Minobu.

Nakaoki's father, the lay priest Nakaoki no Jiro, had already passed away when this letter was written. Despite his own long-standing faith in the Nembutsu, he had apparently embraced the Daishonin's teachings when they met during his exile and had protected him during his stay on the island. Later, one of his sons, the Nakaoki of this letter, also became the Daishonin's follower, along with his wife. After the Daishonin was pardoned and went to live at Minobu, the young Nakaoki repeatedly made the journey from Sado

to see him and bring him offerings.

In the beginning of this letter, the Daishonin describes how Buddhism was first introduced to Japan, and how erroneous teachings such as those of the Nembutsu and True Word have spread throughout the country. Because the Daishonin pointed out the errors of the various schools, he met with repeated persecutions, culminating in an abortive attempt to behead him at Tatsunokuchi and his subsequent exile to Sado Island. He continues, however, that he alone has made clear the underlying cause of recent disasters affecting the nation, urging people to abandon mistaken teachings and instead chant the daimoku of the Lotus Sutra. Therefore, he is "the most loyal subject in all of Japan." Though the people may despise him and the authorities persecute him, because he embraces the Lotus Sutra, which all Buddhas cherish, he is certain to be

protected. In conclusion, the Daishonin praises the faith of the Nakaokis in supporting the votary of the Lotus

Sutra, and assures them of great blessings in this life and the life to come.

## Notes

1. The two deities refer to Izanagi and Izanami, male and female deities appearing in *The Records of Ancient Matters* and *The Chronicles of Japan* as the mythological creators of Japan and its gods.

2. This episode is said to have occurred when Prince Shotoku (574–622), famous for his application of the spirit of Buddhism to government, was a very small child and appears in *The Biography of Prince Shotoku*.

3. Reference is to the whole of Japan. Japan was divided into sixty-six provinces, excluding Hokkaido. The two islands are Iki and Tsushima.

4. The three thousand Buddhas are said to appear in the past Glorious Kalpa, the present Wise Kalpa, and the future Constellation Kalpa. They are listed in *The Record of the Three Thousand Buddhas of the Three Kalpas*.

5. The steward and the lord of the manor refers to Tojo Kagenobu, the steward of Tojo Village in Nagasa District, and Hojo Tomotoki, the lord of Nagasa District in Awa Province, respectively. Hojo Tomotoki was a younger brother of Hojo Yasutoki, the third regent of the Kamakura government.

6. The lay priest of Saimyo-ji is Hojo Tokiyori (1227–1263), the fifth regent of the Kamakura government, and the lay priest

of Gokuraku-ji, Hojo Shigetoki (1198–1261), another high official of the government.

7. The lord of the province of Sagami is Hojo Tokimune (1251–1284), the eighth regent of the Kamakura government.

8. The emperor of Engi is the sixtieth emperor Daigo (r. 897–930). Sugawara no Michizane (845–903) was a court scholar, poet, and official. He served as a counterbalance to the power of the Fujiwara family, who held most of the important government posts. Falsely accused by the Fujiwara of plotting against the throne, Michizane was sent into exile in Kyushu, where he died.

9. “A thousand *ri*” here simply indicates a very long distance.

10. The thirteenth anniversary is the memorial service held on the twelfth anniversary of a person’s death. In Japanese tradition, the second year following a person’s death is commemorated as the third. Japanese tradition also places importance on the 7th, 49th, and 100th days after the death, and on the 1st, 3rd, 7th, 13th, 17th, 23rd, 27th, 33rd, and 50th anniversaries of the death, and at such times people observe special memorial services for the deceased.

11. According to Buddhist tradition, 120 is the maximum possible life span attainable by human beings.