

Letter to Niike



WHAT a joy it is for us to have been born in the Latter Day of the Law and to have shared in the propagation of the Lotus Sutra! How pitiful are those who, though born in this time, cannot believe in this sutra!

No one can escape death once born as a human being, so why do you not practice in preparation for the next life? When I observe what people are doing, I realize that, although they profess faith in the Lotus Sutra and clasp its scrolls, they act against the intent of the sutra and are thereby doomed to the evil paths. To illustrate, a person has five internal organs,¹ but should even one of them become diseased, it will infect all the others, and eventually the person will die. The Great Teacher Dengyo states that though they praise the Lotus Sutra they destroy its heart.² He means that, even if people embrace, read, and praise the Lotus Sutra, if they betray its intent, they will be destroying not only Shakyamuni Buddha but all the Buddhas in the ten directions.

Our worldly misdeeds and evil karma may have piled up as high as Mount Sumeru, but when we take faith in this sutra, they will vanish like frost or dew under the sun of the Lotus Sutra. Nevertheless, if one commits even one or two of the fourteen slanders set forth in this sutra, one's offense will be extremely difficult to expiate. Killing a

single Buddha would be a far greater offense than destroying all the sentient beings in the major world system, and to violate the sutra's intent would be to commit the sin of taking the lives of all the Buddhas in the ten directions. One who commits any of these fourteen is a slanderer.

Hell is a dreadful dwelling of fire, and the realm of hungry spirits is a pitiful place where, driven by starvation, they devour their own children. The realm of asuras consists of strife, and that of animals is to kill or be killed. The hell of the crimson lotus is so called because the intense cold of this hell makes one double over until one's back splits open and the bloody flesh emerges like a crimson lotus flower. And the hell of the great crimson lotus is even more horrible. When one falls into such an evil place, the fact that one was a ruler or a general means nothing. Tormented by the wardens of hell, one is no different than a monkey on a string. What use are fame and fortune then? Can one still be arrogant and persist in false beliefs?

Stop and ponder! How rare is the faith that moves one to give alms to the priest who knows the heart of the Lotus Sutra! One will not stray into the evil paths if one does so even once. Still greater are the benefits arising from ten or twenty contributions, or from

five years, ten years, or a lifetime of contributions. They are beyond even the measure of the Buddhas' wisdom. The Buddha taught that the blessings of a single offering to the votary of this sutra are a hundred, thousand, ten thousand, million times greater than those of offering countless treasures to Shakyamuni Buddha for eighty million kalpas. When one encounters this sutra, one will overflow with happiness and shed tears of joy. It seems impossible to repay one's debt to Shakyamuni Buddha. But by your frequent offerings to me deep in this mountain you will repay the merciful kindness of both the Lotus Sutra and Shakyamuni Buddha. Strive ever harder in faith, and never give in to negligence. All the people appear to believe sincerely when they first embrace the Lotus Sutra, but as time passes, they tend to become less devout; they no longer revere or make offerings to the priest, giving themselves up to arrogance and forming distorted views. This is most frightening. Be diligent in developing your faith until the last moment of your life. Otherwise you will have regrets. For example, the journey from Kamakura to Kyoto takes twelve days. If you travel for eleven but stop with only one day remaining, how can you admire the moon over the capital? No matter what, stay close to the priest who knows the heart of the Lotus Sutra, keep learning from him the principles of Buddhism, and continue your journey of faith.

How swiftly the days pass! It makes us realize how few are the years we have left. Friends enjoy the cherry blossoms together on spring mornings, and then they are gone, carried away like the blossoms by the winds of impermanence, leaving nothing but their names. Although the blossoms have scattered, the cherry trees will bloom again with the coming of spring, but when will those people be reborn? The companions with whom we enjoyed compos-

ing poems praising the moon on autumn evenings have vanished with the moon behind the shifting clouds. Only their mute images remain in our hearts. Though the moon has set behind the western mountains, we will compose poetry under it again next autumn. But where are our companions who have passed away? Even when the approaching tiger of death³ roars, we do not hear and are not startled. How many more days are left to the sheep bound for slaughter?

Deep in the Snow Mountains lives a bird called the cold-suffering bird that, tortured by the numbing cold, cries that it will build a nest in the morning. Yet when day breaks, it sleeps away the hours in the warm light of the morning sun without building its nest. So it continues to cry vainly throughout its life. The same is true of human beings. When they fall into hell and gasp in its flames, they long to be reborn as humans and vow to put everything else aside and serve the three treasures in order to gain enlightenment in their next life. But even on the rare occasions when they happen to be reborn in human form, the winds of fame and profit blow violently, and the lamp of Buddhist practice is easily extinguished. Without a qualm they squander their wealth on meaningless trifles, but begrudge even the smallest contribution to the Buddha, the Law, and the Buddhist Order. This is very serious, for then they are being hindered by messengers from hell. This is the meaning of "good by the inch and evil by the foot."⁴

Furthermore, since this country is a land whose people slander the correct teaching, the benevolent gods who should be protecting the nation have been deprived of the flavor of the Law and have ascended to heaven, forsaking their shrines. The empty shrines have been occupied by demons who are misleading the worshipers. The

Buddha, having finished preaching, has returned to the Land of Tranquil Light. Halls and pagodas, and temples and shrines have been abandoned to become the dwellings of devils. These imposing structures stand in rows, built at state expense and through compulsory labor imposed on the people. This is not merely my own opinion; it is found in the sutras, so you should study them well.

Neither Buddhas nor gods would ever accept contributions from those who slander the correct teaching. Then how can we human beings accept them? The deity of Kasuga Shrine⁵ proclaimed through an oracle that he would accept nothing from those with impure hearts, though he should have to eat the flames of burning copper; that he would refuse to set foot in their homes, though he should have to sit on red-hot copper. He would rather come down to a miserable hut with weeds choking the passageway, or to a poor thatched house. He declared that he would never visit persons lacking in faith, even if they hung sacred festoons for a thousand days to welcome him, but that he would go to a house where the people have a mind of faith, even though they might be in mourning for a parent. Lamenting that slanderers have overrun this country, the benevolent gods have abandoned it and ascended to heaven. "Those with impure hearts" means those who refuse to embrace the Lotus Sutra, as is stated in the fifth volume of the sutra. If the gods themselves regard alms from slanderers as more abominable than the flames of burning copper, how could we human beings possibly accept them? If someone were to kill our parents and then try to offer us some gift, could we possibly accept it? Not even wise persons or sages can avoid the hell of incessant suffering if they accept offerings from slanderers. Nor should you associate with slanderers, for if you do,

you will share the same guilt as they. This you should fear above all.

Shakyamuni Buddha is the father, sovereign, and teacher of all the other Buddhas and all the gods, of the whole assembly of human and heavenly beings, and of all living beings. How could the heavenly gods and benevolent deities rejoice if the Buddha were killed? Today all the people of our country have proved to be enemies of Shakyamuni Buddha, but more than laymen or laywomen, it is the priests with perverse wisdom and hearts who are the Buddha's worst enemies. There are two kinds of wisdom, correct and perverse. No matter how wise a person may appear, if his assertions are warped you should not listen to him. Nor should you follow priests merely because they are venerable or of high rank. But if a person has the wisdom to know the true meaning of the Lotus Sutra, no matter how lowly he may appear, pay respect to him and make offerings to him as though he were a living Thus Come One. Thus it is written in the sutra.⁶ That is why the Great Teacher Dengyo says that the men and women who believe in this sutra, even if they lack knowledge or violate the precepts, should be seated above priests who observe all two hundred and fifty precepts of the Hinayana teachings, and never be seated in a humble position, and that this is all the more true of the priests of this Mahayana sutra.

The priest Ryokan of Gokuraku-ji temple is thought to be a living Thus Come One, but the men and women who believe in the Lotus Sutra should be seated high above him. It seems extraordinary that this Ryokan, who observes the two hundred and fifty precepts, should become angry and glare at me, Nichiren, whenever he sees me. The learned man has been possessed by a devil. It is like the case of a generally even-tempered person who, when

drunk, reveals his evil side and causes trouble. Prior to the preaching of the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha taught that those who gave alms to Mahakashyapa, Shariputra, Maudgalyayana, [and Subhuti] would fall into the three evil paths. He said that the minds of these voice-hearers were inferior to those of dogs or foxes. These four great voice-hearers adamantly upheld the two hundred and fifty precepts, and their observance of the three thousand rules of conduct was as perfect as the full moon on the fifteenth night. Nevertheless, until they embraced the Lotus Sutra, they were bitterly criticized by the Buddha. How much more would this be so in the case of the priests today who are inferior to them!

So flagrantly do the priests of Kencho-ji and Engaku-ji temples⁷ break the code of ceremonies and the precepts, that they seem like a mountain that has collapsed into rubble. Their wanton behavior is like that of monkeys. It is utterly futile to look for salvation in the next life by giving alms to such priests. The benevolent gods who lend their protection have no doubt abandoned our land. Long ago the heavenly gods and benevolent deities, bodhisattvas and voice-hearers pledged in a single voice in the presence of Shakyamuni Buddha that, if a land hostile to the Lotus Sutra should exist, they would appear in the form of frost and hail in the sixth month to drive the land into famine; or turn into insects and devour the five kinds of grain;⁸ or cause droughts or floods to ruin the fields and farms; or become gales and sweep the people to their deaths; or transform themselves into demons and cause suffering for the people. Great Bodhisattva Hachiman was among those present. Does he not fear breaking the oath made at Eagle Peak? Should he break his promise, he would surely be doomed to the hell of incessant suffering—a fearful, ter-

rible thing to contemplate. Until the envoy of the Buddha actually appeared in the world to propagate the Lotus Sutra, the rulers of the land were not hostile to it, for they revered all the sutras equally.

Now that I am spreading the Lotus Sutra as the Buddha's envoy, however, everyone from the ruler on down to the common people has become a slanderer of the correct teaching. So far Hachiman has done everything possible to prevent hostility toward the Lotus Sutra from developing among the people of this country, as reluctant to abandon them as parents would be to abandon an only child, even if it were unfilial. But now in fear of breaking the pledge he made at Eagle Peak, he has burned down his shrine and ascended to heaven. Even so, should there be a votary of the Lotus Sutra who would give his body and life for it, Hachiman would dwell upon his head. But since both the Sun Goddess and Great Bodhisattva Hachiman have gone, how could the other gods remain in their shrines? Even if they did not wish to leave, how could they stay another day if I reproached them for not keeping the promise they made at Eagle Peak? A person may be a thief, but as long as no one knows, he can live wherever he wishes. But when denounced as a thief by someone who knows him, he is forced to leave his dwelling against his will. In the same way, because I know of their vow, the gods are compelled to abandon their shrines. Contrary to popular belief, this country has become inhabited by evil demons. How pitiful!

Many have spread the various teachings put forth by the Buddha in his lifetime, but until now, no one, not even T'ien-t'ai or Dengyo, has taught the most important of all.⁹ That is as it should be, for that teaching spreads with the advent of Bodhisattva Superior Practices during the first five

hundred years of the Latter Day of the Law.

No matter what, always keep your faith in the Lotus Sutra steadfast. Then, at the last moment of your life, you will be welcomed by a thousand Buddhas, who will take you swiftly to the pure land of Eagle Peak where you will experience the boundless joy of the Law. If your faith weakens and you do not attain Buddhahood in this lifetime, do not reproach me. If you do, you will be like the sick man who refuses the good medicine his physician prescribes and takes poison instead. He does not recover, but it never occurs to him that it is his fault, and he blames the physician. Faith in this sutra means that you will surely attain Buddhahood if you are true to the entirety of the Lotus Sutra, adhering exactly to its teachings without adding any of your own ideas or following the arbitrary interpretations of others.

Becoming a Buddha is nothing extraordinary. If you chant Nam-myohorenge-kyo with your whole heart, you will naturally become endowed with the Buddha's thirty-two features and eighty characteristics. As the sutra says, "hoping to make all persons equal to me, without any distinction between us,"¹⁰ you can readily become as noble a Buddha as Shakyamuni. A bird's egg contains nothing but liquid, yet by itself this develops into a beak, two eyes, and all the other parts, and the bird soars into the sky. We, too, are the eggs of ignorance, which are pitiful things, but when nurtured by the chanting of Nam-myohorenge-kyo, which is like the warmth of the mother bird, we develop the beak of the thirty-two features and the feathers of the eighty characteristics and are free to soar into the sky of the true aspect of all phenomena and the reality of all things. This is what is meant by the sutra passage that says in essence: "All people dwell in the shell of ignorance, lack-

ing the beak of wisdom. The Buddha comes back to this world—the land where sages and common mortals live together, the latter undergoing transmigration with differences and limitations¹¹—just as a mother bird returns to her nest, and cracks the shell of ignorance so that all people, like fledglings, may leave the nest and soar into the sky of the essential nature of phenomena and the reality of all things."¹²

"Knowledge without faith" describes those who are knowledgeable about the Buddhist doctrines but have no faith. These people will never attain Buddhahood. Those of "faith without knowledge" may lack knowledge but have faith and can attain Buddhahood. This is not merely my own opinion; it is stated clearly in the Lotus Sutra. In the second volume, the Buddha says, "Even you, Shariputra, in the case of this sutra were able to gain entrance through faith alone, not because of any wisdom of your own."¹³ This shows that even Shariputra, unsurpassed in his wisdom, was able to attain Buddhahood only by embracing and firmly believing in this sutra, and that his wisdom alone did not enable him to become a Buddha. If Shariputra could not attain Buddhahood through his wisdom, how can we ordinary people, with limited knowledge of the doctrines, dare to dream that we may attain Buddhahood when we do not have faith? The Buddha explains that people in the latter age will be arrogant, though their knowledge of the doctrines is trifling, and will show disrespect to the priests, neglect the Law, and thereby fall into the evil paths. If one truly understands the Buddhist teachings, one should show this in one's respect for the priests, reverence for the Law, and offerings to the Buddha. Shakyamuni Buddha is not among us now, so you must respect the teacher with enlightened wisdom as you would the Buddha himself. How, then, could you not receive blessings? If one wish-

es for happiness in one's next existence, one should renounce one's desire for fame and fortune and respect the priest who teaches the Lotus Sutra as one would a living Thus Come One, no matter how humble that priest's station. Thus it is written in the sutra.

The Zen school today generally violates the five constant virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and good faith. To honor the wise and virtuous, to respect the elderly, and to protect the young are recognized universally as humane conduct in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist scriptures. But the Zen priests were until yesterday or the day before no more than uneducated rabble, unable to distinguish black from white. But now that they have donned priestly robes, they have become so conceited that they belittle the learned and virtuous priests of the Tendai and True Word schools. They observe none of the proper manners and think they rank higher than all others. These people are so insolent that even animals are better behaved. The Great Teacher Dengyo states that the otter shows its respect by offering up the fish it has caught,¹⁴ the crow in the forest carries food to its parents and grandparents, the dove takes care to perch three branches lower than its father, wild geese keep perfect formation when they fly together, and lambs kneel to drink their mother's milk. He asks: if lowly animals conduct

themselves with such propriety, how can human beings be so lacking in courtesy? Judging from the words of Dengyo, it is only natural that the Zen priests should be confused about Buddhism when they are ignorant even of how people should behave. They are acting like Papiyas, the heavenly devil.

Understand clearly what I have taught you here, and continue your practice without negligence, reverently believing in the single sutra consisting of eight volumes and twenty-eight chapters. When you long to see me, pray to the sun every day, and once a day my image will be reflected there. Have the priest who is my messenger read this letter to you. Trust him as a teacher with enlightened wisdom, and ask him any questions you may have about the doctrines. If you do not question and resolve your doubts, you cannot dispel the dark clouds of illusion, any more than you could travel a thousand miles without legs. Have him read this letter again and again, and listen attentively. In anticipation of speaking with you at our next meeting, I will conclude here.

Respectfully,
Nichiren

The second month in the third year
of Koan (1280)

To Niike



Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter in the second month of 1280 to Niike Saemon-no-jo, an official in the Kamakura shogunate. Niike was from Niike Village in Iwata District of Totomi Province. He and his wife had been converted to the Daishonin's teachings

by Nikko Shonin and had maintained their faith despite government pressure.

First, Nichiren Daishonin tells Niike what great fortune it is to have been born in the Latter Day of the Law with the mission to spread the correct teaching of Buddhism throughout the

world. Yet it would be foolhardy to profess faith in the Lotus Sutra and then commit slander. The consequence is to descend into an evil path of existence, regardless of one's role or status. Using the example of the cold-suffering bird, the Daishonin admonishes his believers never to lapse into negligence, or be tempted by fame or fortune.

After mentioning the deplorable state

of the country and the degradation of Buddhist priests, he depicts the purpose of the Lotus Sutra by comparing an ordinary person to an egg. Like the fluids in an egg that develop into a bird, enlightenment exists as a potential within human life. Lastly, he says that the key to enlightenment is faith in the Gohonzon.

Notes

1. The liver, lungs, heart, kidneys, and spleen.

2. *The Outstanding Principles of the Lotus Sutra*.

3. The "tiger of death" image is derived from a passage in *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* that states that, no matter how sweet the water or lush the grass, sheep will go hungry for fear of the ferocious tiger.

4. Here the Japanese word *ma*, or 'devil,' is being translated as 'evil' for clarity of expression. In this case it means what obstructs a greater good.

5. An important shrine in Nara, associated with the Fujiwara family.

6. The "Teacher of the Law" chapter reads, "In the evil world following my extinction if there are those who can embrace this sutra, you should press your palms together in reverence and offer alms to them as you would to the World-Honored One."

7. Two of the five major Zen temples in Kamakura. Kencho-ji was founded by Regent Hojo Tokiyori in 1253, and Engaku-ji, by Regent Hojo Tokimune in 1278.

8. Wheat, rice, beans, and two types of millet. Also a generic term for all grains, which is its meaning here.

9. "The most important of all" refers to the teaching that Shakyamuni transferred to Bodhisattva Superior Practices in the "Supernatural Powers" chapter of the Lotus Sutra and defined in the "Medicine King" chapter as the Law that would spread in the last five-hundred-year period after his passing.

10. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.

11. This refers to the transmigration of unenlightened beings through the six paths. Living beings are said to repeat the cycle of rebirth amid the six lower worlds, which are characterized by delusion, with limited life spans and in different forms in accordance with their karma.

12. Source unknown.

13. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.

14. The Chinese believed that, when the otter left part of a fish uneaten, it was in fact presenting the remains as a religious offering. This story is found in the Confucian *Book of Rites*.