

## White Horses and White Swans



IN the letter you wrote from Utsu-busa you say that the ninth day of the eighth month will mark the hundredth-day anniversary of your father's passing, and that, as an offering, you present ten thousand coins with deep respect.

In the declaration you sent for the memorial service, you say that you have read and recited the entire Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law once, the "Expedient Means" and "Life Span" chapters thirty times each, and the verse section of the "Life Span" chapter three hundred times, and have chanted the daimoku of Myoho-*renge-kyo* fifty thousand times. In the same document you say that you recall gratefully how, when your deceased father was still alive, you, my disciple, journeyed a thousand *ri* over mountains and rivers [to this distant place], receiving in person from me the daimoku of the Mystic Law, and how, less than thirty days later, your father's life came to an end. You say that although, alas, he has now become mere white bones in the dew garden<sup>1</sup> of Jambudvīpa, that although he has turned to dust and earth, you believe that his departed spirit will surely blossom into a flower of enlightenment in the land of Eagle Peak.

Your declaration is signed, "Respectfully yours, the woman disciple of the Onakatomi clan, third year of the Koan era (1280)."

When we consider the matter, we realize that, although in India the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law, the single vehicle, is so voluminous that it can fill a whole city one *yojana* square, the version that has been transmitted to Japan consists of only eight volumes. In the past, there have been many examples of people who, praying to receive benefit in their present or future existences, have achieved their desires by reciting and praising all eight volumes, or merely one volume, or the "Expedient Means" and "Life Span" chapters, or the verse section of the "Life Span" chapter alone. I will say no more about these examples here.

In your declaration you speak of reciting the daimoku of Myoho-*renge-kyo* fifty thousand times. With regard to this statement, I have tried to think of earlier examples of such a practice, but they seem to be very few. Although there may have been some who recited this daimoku once or twice and gained benefit, I have never heard of anyone who recited it fifty thousand times.

All phenomena have their respective names, and the name in each case indicates the particular virtue or property inherent in that thing. For example, the person known as General Stone Tiger was so called because he was capable of penetrating a stone tiger with

an arrow. And the minister Target Piercing<sup>2</sup> was given that name because he could shoot an arrow through a target made of iron. In both cases, the name indicates the qualities of the person.

In the case of the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law, the virtues and benefits of its eight volumes and twenty-eight chapters are all contained within the five characters that make up its title; it is like, for instance, the wish-granting jewel that contains ten thousand different jewels within it. This is what is meant by the doctrine that the three thousand realms are all contained within a single particle of dust.

The word *namu* expresses feelings of reverence and a sense of compliance. Therefore, the Venerable Ananda placed *namu* above the two characters meaning "this" [of "This is what I heard"], which he wrote at the beginning of all the sutras. The Great Teacher Nan-yüeh employed the words Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, and the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai, the words Keishu-nam-myoho-enge-kyo.<sup>3</sup>

The Venerable Ananda was the son of King Dronodana and a disciple of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings. Sixty days after Shakyamuni passed away, Mahakashyapa and the other disciples, a thousand persons in all, along with Manjushri and the others, eighty thousand bodhisattvas, all gathered together in the Great Lecture Hall to lament the passing of the Buddha. They conferred among themselves, saying: "Even we, who attended upon the Buddha for so many years, lament our parting from him after only sixty days. What, then, of all the people who live a hundred years from now, a thousand years from now, or in the Latter Day of the Law? What means will they have to cherish his memory?"

"The six teachers of the non-Buddhist doctrines preserve the four Vedas and the eighteen major scriptures that the two deities and the three ascetics<sup>4</sup>

preached and left behind eight hundred years ago, so that the words left by their teachers might be transmitted to later ages. Should we not likewise write down the various teachings that we have heard the Buddha preach to the voice-hearers and the great bodhisattvas over the course of fifty years, so that they may serve as an eye to the people of the future?"

So concurring, they invited the Venerable Ananda to ascend to the highest seat and looked up to him in reverence in the same way they would the Buddha, while they themselves sat in the lower seats. Then Bodhisattva Manjushri recited the words Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, and the Venerable Ananda, in response to this, replied, "This is what I heard." The 999 other great arhats then all dipped their brushes in ink and wrote down the words that were spoken.

It is precisely because all the benefits represented by the eight volumes and twenty-eight chapters of the Lotus Sutra are contained within these five characters that Bodhisattva Manjushri recited them. The Venerable Ananda responded by saying, "Yes, indeed!" And the twelve thousand voice-hearers, the eighty thousand great bodhisattvas, and all the various other listeners from the two worlds and eight groups,<sup>5</sup> since that agreed with what they had heard previously, signified their assent.

The sage known as the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai Chih-che wrote about the five characters of Myoho-enge-kyo in the ten volumes and thousand pages of his work *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*. The gist of this work is that the eighty volumes or sixty volumes or forty volumes of the Flower Garland Sutra, the several hundred volumes of the Agama sutras, the scores of volumes of the Correct and Equal Great Collection Sutra, the forty volumes or six hundred volumes of the Larger Wisdom Sutra, the forty volumes or thirty-six

volumes of the Nirvana Sutra, and all the countless sutras in India, in the palaces of the dragon kings, in the heavens, and in the worlds of the ten directions that are as numerous as the dust particles of the land, are all servants and followers of the single character *kyo*, or sutra, of Myoho-enge-kyo.

Moreover, the Great Teacher Miaolo wrote a work in ten volumes entitled *The Annotations on "The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra,"* in which he declared that all the sutras that were brought to China after the time of T'ien-t'ai, including the sutras known as the new translations,<sup>6</sup> are all servants and retainers of the Lotus Sutra. And in Japan, the Great Teacher Dengyo likewise established that the Mahavairochana Sutra and the other sutras of the True Word school, which are among the new translations, are all servants and retainers of the Lotus Sutra. Kobo, Jikaku, Chisho, and others, however, put forth opinions that were as different from this teaching as fire is from water. I will outline these opinions later in this letter.

To illustrate, without a single exception the five regions around the capital, the seven marches, the sixty-six provinces, the two islands, and all the districts, manors, villages, fields, plots, persons, cows and horses, gold, silver, and other things in Japan are all contained within the three characters that make up the words "country of Japan."

The character "king"<sup>7</sup> is written with three horizontal lines and one vertical line. The three horizontal lines represent heaven, earth, and humanity, and the single vertical line represents the ruler. Like Mount Sumeru, which rises up out of the great earth and never sways, one whose presence pervades the realms of heaven, earth, and humanity and who does not waver in the slightest is called the ruler.

There are always two kinds of rulers, the first kind being the petty rulers.

Minor sovereigns in the realms of human and heavenly beings would be considered petty rulers. The second kind are the great rulers; the great heavenly king Brahma would be classified as such. In the case of Japan, the sovereign of the entire country would be considered a great ruler, while the governors of the various provinces would be petty rulers.

In the same way, sutras such as those of the Flower Garland, Agama, Correct and Equal, and Wisdom periods, the Mahavairochana Sutra, the Nirvana Sutra, and all the other sutras preached before, simultaneously with, or after the Lotus Sutra are petty rulers. They are like the governors of the various provinces of Japan.

The Lotus Sutra, however, is comparable to a great ruler, a Son of Heaven. Hence, the people of the Flower Garland school, the True Word school, and the other schools are like the subjects and followers of the ruler of the nation. But when people who in social rank are no more than subjects living in the various provinces attempt to divest the Son of Heaven of his virtue, then it is as if inferiors are overthrowing superiors, as if the people are turning their backs on superiors and heeding inferiors, or as if the inferiors have overcome the superiors and are rioting and creating disturbances.

No matter how much one may hope to bring about order in the world under such circumstances, the result will only be confusion within the state and the downfall of the persons involved. One might as well try to move the roots of a tree without disturbing the branches and leaves, or hope that a ship could sail peacefully when the waves of the sea have risen in fury.

Though the priests of the Flower Garland, True Word, and Nembutsu schools as well as those of the Precepts and Zen teachings claim to possess great wisdom and eminence, strictly abiding by the precepts and conducting

themselves honestly, their status is that of persons born into families who engage in the overthrow of superiors by inferiors, and as such they are arch-enemies of the Lotus Sutra. Can they hope to escape falling into the great citadel of the Avichi hell? Among the adherents of the ninety-five different types of non-Buddhist schools,<sup>8</sup> there were no doubt many who were honest and wise, and yet, because they subscribed to the erroneous doctrines handed down from the two deities and the three ascetics, they could not escape being reborn in the evil paths.

In the world today, however, those people who recite Namu Amida Butsu laugh at those who recite Nam-myohorenge-kyo, or try to deceive them. To use secular comparisons, this is like millet disliking rice, or a landowner detesting his own fields. They are like bandits when the leaders of the army are not present, supposing that they will not be punished for their night raids or acts of burglary, or like moles before the sun has come up, believing that they are as safe as they would be underground. But when Nam-myohorenge-kyo, which is like the leader of an army or like the sun, appears, they disappear as quickly as raging flames vanish under water, or as monkeys cower when they encounter dogs. Today, when the reciters of Namu Amida Butsu hear voices chanting Nam-myohorenge-kyo, the color drains from their faces and their eyes glare with anger, their wits desert them and their bodies begin to quake.

The Great Teacher Dengyo said that, when the sun comes up, the stars hide themselves, and that, when true skill appears, clumsiness becomes known.<sup>9</sup> Bodhisattva Nagarjuna stated that erroneous words are easily dismissed, and that mistaken opinions are hard to support.<sup>10</sup> Bodhisattva Gunamati said, "On her face there was the color of death and mourning, and in her words there

was the sound of sorrow and resentment."<sup>11</sup> And Fa-sui said, "Those who were formerly the tigers of assertion are now the deer of assent."<sup>12</sup> One should consider these opinions and understand their intent.

Let us openly and clearly outline the virtues of Myoho-enge-kyo! Just as poisonous compounds are changed into medicine, so these five characters of Myoho-enge-kyo change evil into good. The Spring of Jewels is so called because, in this spring, stones are changed into jewels.<sup>13</sup> In the same way, these five characters can change ordinary human beings into Buddhas. Therefore, because your beloved departed father chanted Nam-myohorenge-kyo while he was alive, he was a person who attained Buddhahood in his present form, in the same way that stones change into jewels.

The actions you have taken, then, are the very height of filial piety and concern. Therefore, it says in the Lotus Sutra: "These two sons of mine have carried out the Buddha's work," and also "These two sons have been good friends to me."<sup>14</sup>

Long ago there lived a great ruler named King Rinda. As long as this ruler could listen to the neighing of white horses, his color remained healthy, he had great strength and vigor, and he was satisfied without being offered food. Even his enemies in neighboring countries doffed their helmets and pressed their palms together in admiration.

But the white horses neighed only when they caught sight of white swans. And because the ruler's manner of governing was faulty, or perhaps because of some evil karma from his past, all the white swans disappeared. With not a single bird left, the white horses no longer neighed. And when the white horses ceased to neigh, the king's complexion faded, his strength drained away, his body grew thin and withered,

and his plans for government became shallow and ineffectual.

Soon the nation was in a state of chaos. Lamenting over what to do if soldiers from neighboring nations should rush to attack his country, the king issued a proclamation in which he said: "In our nation, many people follow the non-Buddhist teachings, all of which enjoy our patronage and support. The same is true of the Buddhist teaching. But the non-Buddhists and Buddhists are on bad terms with each other. Now whichever of these two groups can succeed in making the white horses neigh will have its teaching made the object of our faith, while the other's teaching will be banished from the nation."

At this time all the non-Buddhist leaders gathered together and tried their best to make the white swans appear and the white horses neigh, but no swans appeared. Although in the past these leaders had shown themselves capable of causing clouds to form and fog to come rolling in, of calling forth winds and stirring up waves, of bringing forth fire or water from their bodies, of changing men into horses or horses into men, and of performing any acts that they pleased, for some reason on this occasion they could not make the swans appear.

At this time there was a disciple of the Buddha known as Bodhisattva Ashvaghosha, or Horse Neigh. When he prayed to the Buddhas of the ten directions, the white swans immediately came forth, and the white horses began to neigh. When the king heard the sound, his color began to improve somewhat, his strength returned, and his skin took on a fresh look. More white swans appeared, and still more, until a thousand birds had come forth, and a thousand white horses neighed all at the same time like cocks crowing at dawn. When the king heard this sound, his complexion became as

bright as the sun, his skin as fresh-looking as the moon, his strength as powerful as the god Narayana, and his plans for government as sagacious as those of the god Brahma.

Then, because the silken words of the ruler were as irreversible as the outflow of sweat from the body, all the temples belonging to the non-Buddhist leaders were converted into Buddhist temples.

The country of Japan today resembles the story of King Rinda. This country began with the era of the gods. As it gradually approached the latter age, however, the views of its people became warped, and greed, anger, and foolishness grew stronger. The gods became shallow in their understanding, their authority and power waned, and they began to have difficulty extending their protection even to their devotees.

Meanwhile, the teachings of the great doctrine known as Buddhism were introduced to the country and gradually spread. The people once again became honest and straightforward in their outlook, and the gods were restored to power and authority. But many erroneous opinions appeared in connection with the Buddhist beliefs, and because of these the situation in the country became perilous.

The Great Teacher Dengyo traveled to China and there carried out an investigation into all the various sacred teachings of Japan, China, and India. He discarded those that were inferior and selected those that were worthy, examining each without prejudice or favor. In the end he singled out the Lotus Sutra and two other sutras,<sup>15</sup> designating them as the three sutras that would ensure the protection of the nation.

Other sages, however, such as the great teachers Kobo, Jikaku, and Chisho, claiming to base their ideas on teachings from China or India, pro-

ceeded to demote the Lotus Sutra to second or third rank among the sutras, declaring it to be a work of “childish theory”<sup>16</sup> or claiming that it belonged to “the region of darkness.”<sup>17</sup> In place of the Lotus Sutra, they elevated the three sutras<sup>18</sup> of the True Word teaching to the position of highest honor.

Thus the age gradually became one in which inferiors overthrow superiors, and these mistaken doctrines spread throughout the entire country. Hence many people have fallen into the evil paths, and the gods have little by little lost their authority, again finding it difficult to protect even their own devotees. As a result, we see that the five rulers<sup>19</sup> of the nation, from the eighty-first to the eighty-fifth sovereign, either drowned in the western ocean or were abandoned on islands in the four seas. They were treated like demons while they were alive, and after their demise they fell into the hell of incessant suffering.

However, because there was no one who understood this situation, it has been impossible to remedy it. I am generally aware of these matters, and

therefore try to repay the debt of gratitude I owe my country [by speaking the truth], but people only hate me for it.

But I will say no more about that. Instead I would like to say that your beloved father is comparable to King Rinda, and you yourself are comparable to Bodhisattva Ashvaghosha. The white swans are the Lotus Sutra, the white horses are Nichiren, and the neighing of the white horses is the sound of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. And so, in the same way that, when King Rinda hears the sound of the horses, his complexion brightens and his strength increases, when your beloved deceased father hears the sound of your voice chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, he will delight in his Buddhahood.

Nichiren

The fourteenth day of the eighth month in the third year of Koan (1280)

Reply to the lady of Utsubusa



## Background

This letter was sent from Minobu to a follower known only as “the lady of Utsubusa,” who lived in Utsubusa in Ihara District of Suruga Province. The Daishonin’s letter is a reply to the offerings and declaration his follower sent when she requested that a memorial service be conducted on the hundredth-day anniversary of her father’s passing. Judging from the fact that she sent the Daishonin ten thousand coins, a fairly large sum of money, and from the contents of her personal vow, it is quite likely that she was a woman of some means.

At the beginning of this letter, the Daishonin reviews the declaration he had received from her, in which she stated that she had recited the Lotus Sutra and chanted fifty thousand daimoku for her father. The Daishonin praises her dedication and teaches that all the benefits of the Lotus Sutra are contained in the daimoku, its title. He next points out the errors of those who are attached to other sutras, stressing that these sutras are no more than “servants and retainers” of the Lotus Sutra. The Daishonin assures his follower that, because her father chanted

Nam-myoho-rence-kyo, he certainly attained Buddhahood during his lifetime.

He then introduces the story of King Rinda, who was a strong, healthy, and capable ruler only as long as he could hear the neighing of white horses. The horses, in turn, raised their voices only when they could see white swans. For this reason, this letter is

known by the title *White Horses and White Swans*. Here the Daishonin likens the white horses to himself and their neighing to the sound of voices chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo. He tells the lady of Utsubusa that, when she chants Nam-myoho-rence-kyo, her deceased father will delight in his Buddhahood.

## Notes

1. The "dew garden" is a metaphorical expression meaning that all things in the continent of Jambudvīpa (signifying the entire world) are as fleeting as dew in the garden, which quickly vanishes in the morning sun.

2. Ikuwa no Toda no Sukune, a fourth-century Japanese court official. *The Chronicles of Japan* relates how he pierced an iron shield with an arrow.

3. One's reverence for and devotion to Nam-myoho-rence-kyo. Keishu means to prostrate oneself on the ground in an act of obeisance.

4. The two deities refer to the two Brahman deities Shiva and Vishnu, and the three ascetics, to Kapila, Uluka, and Rishabha. For three ascetics, see Glossary.

5. "Listeners from the two worlds and eight groups" are beings assembled at the ceremony of the preaching of the Lotus Sutra. The two worlds—the world of desire and the world of form—are two of the three worlds that make up the threefold world. The eight groups refer to the gods of the world of desire, the gods of the world of form, the dragon kings and their followers, the kinnara kings and their followers, the gandharva kings and their followers, the asura kings and their followers, the garuda kings and their followers, and the king of the human world (Ajatashatru) and his followers.

6. Chinese translations of the Indian scriptures completed by or after Hsüan-tsang (602–664). Those done before Hsüan-tsang are called old translations.

7. The Chinese character for "king" discussed here is written: 王.

8. These schools are said to have existed in Shakyamuni's time. Their names and particular doctrines are unknown.

9. This statement is found in *The Verse-Form Record of the Lineage of the Tendai Lotus School*.

10. Source unknown.

11. According to *The Record of the Western Regions*, Gunamati and Madhava, a non-Buddhist scholar famed for his learning, debated each other in the presence of the king of Magadha. Madhava was defeated and died six days later, but his wife, in order to avenge her husband's defeat, concealed his death and attempted to enter the debate against Gunamati as his representative. Recognizing from her expression that her husband must be dead, Gunamati said to her, "I have already defeated one more skilled than you," whereupon she realized that he had discovered her scheme and decided to give up her attempt to debate him. The statement by Gunamati in the text was his response when the king asked him how he knew that Madhava had died.

12. *The Biography of the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai Chih-che of the Sui Dynasty* relates that, when T'ien-t'ai lectured on the title of the Lotus Sutra, Fa-sui, a sixth-century Chinese priest, was struck by his deep understanding of the sutra. This passage represents the words Fa-sui used to express his impressions at that time, although the original passage refers to "dragons" rather than "tigers."

13. Source unknown.

14. Both quotes are from chapter 27 of the Lotus Sutra. These words are spoken by King Wonderful Adornment, a believer in Brahmanism who was led to Buddhism by his two sons.

15. The two other sutras are the Golden Light and Benevolent Kings sutras.

16. This statement appears in Kobo's *Comparison of Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism*.

17. This statement appears in Kobo's *Precious Key to the Secret Treasury*.

18. The Mahavairochana, Diamond Crown, and Susiddhikara sutras.

19. The emperors Antoku, Gotoba, Tsuchimikado, Juntoku, and Chukyo. During the Battle of Dannoura (1185), Antoku, at

age eight, met his end at the final defeat of the Taira, when he drowned in the sea. In 1221, after the Jokyu Disturbance, the Kamakura shogunate exiled the retired emperors Gotoba, Tsuchimikado, and Juntoku, and deposed Emperor Chukyo.