

## Reply to the Mother of Ueno



I HAVE received the offerings that you sent for the forty-ninth-day ceremony marking the passing of your son, the late Nanjo Shichiro Goro. As noted on the list, they consist of two strings of coins, one horseload of polished rice, one horseload of yams, pounded bean curd, konnyaku,<sup>1</sup> one basket of persimmons, fifty citrons, and other items. For the sake of your son's repose, I have recited the entire Lotus Sutra once and the verse section of its "Life Span" chapter several times, and chanted the daimoku hundreds or thousands of times.

The sutra known as the Lotus Sutra is a scripture that has no match among all the sacred teachings of the Buddha's lifetime. And, as indicated by its words "between Buddhas,"<sup>2</sup> it can only be understood between one Buddha and another. Those at the stage of near-perfect enlightenment or below, on down to ordinary mortals, cannot fathom it. This is why Bodhisattva Nagarjuna stated in his *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* that persons below the level of Buddha should simply have faith, and in that way they can attain Buddhahood.

In the "Teacher of the Law" chapter in the fourth volume of the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha states, "Medicine King, now I say to you, I have preached various sutras, and among those sutras the

Lotus is the foremost!" In the fifth volume it says, "Manjushri, this Lotus Sutra is the secret storehouse of the Buddhas, the Thus Come Ones. Among the sutras, it holds the highest place."<sup>3</sup> In the seventh volume we read, "So this Lotus Sutra is likewise. Among all the sutras, it holds the highest place."<sup>4</sup> We also read, "It [this Lotus Sutra] shines the brightest. . . . so this sutra is the most honored."<sup>5</sup>

These passages of scripture do not represent some doctrine that I have put forward on my own. They are the truthful words of the Buddha, and hence it is impossible that they could be in error.

If someone born a commoner should claim to stand equal to a samurai, he would surely be faulted. And how much more so if he should claim that he is equal to the ruler of the nation, or even superior to the ruler! Not only would he himself be punished, but his father and mother and his wife and children would be made to suffer as well. It is like the case of a great fire that burns down houses, or of a great tree that, in falling, brings down the little trees around it as well.

It is the same with the Buddhist teachings. People who rely on the various sutras expounded in the Flower Garland, Agama, Correct and Equal, and Wisdom periods, such as the Maha-

vairochana or the Amida Sutra, regard the one they believe in as best, without distinguishing the relative worth of the sutras. Thus they say, "Our Amida Sutra is equal to the Lotus Sutra," or "It is superior." Fellow believers, hearing their own sutra praised in this way, think it is a cause for joy. On the contrary, however, they are committing a serious offense, and the teachers of such doctrines, their disciples, and their lay supporters will fall as swiftly as flying arrows into the evil paths.

However, those who declare that the Lotus Sutra is superior to all the other sutras are justified in doing so. In fact, they will enjoy great benefits. This is because their declaration accords with what the sutra itself says.

Prefacing the Lotus Sutra is a work called the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra. It is like the vanguard of generals who go before the procession of a great king to quell disturbances. This Immeasurable Meanings Sutra states, "In these more than forty years, I have not yet revealed the truth." These words are like the great bows that the generals carry to drive away the king's enemies with arrows, or the swords with which they cut those enemies down. They are like a royal proclamation, sharp as a sword, directed to the members of the Flower Garland school who read only the Flower Garland Sutra, the priests of the Precepts school with their Agama sutras, the Nembutsu believers with their Meditation Sutra, and the True Word teachers with their Mahavairochana Sutra, chastising them for failing to follow the Lotus Sutra and bringing them to submission. They are like Yoshiie attacking Sadato, or Yoritomo destroying the forces of Kiyomori. These words of the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra, "In these more than forty years . . ." are the sword and rope of the wisdom king Immovable, or the bow and arrows of the wisdom king Craving-Filled.

When the late Nanjo Goro made his way across the mountains of death and the river of three crossings, the soldiers who escorted him and repulsed the mountain bandits of earthly desires and the pirates of past offenses and allowed him to proceed safely to the pure land of Eagle Peak were these words of the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra, "In these more than forty years, I have not yet revealed the truth."

The "Expedient Means" chapter in the first volume of the Lotus Sutra states, "The World-Honored One has long expounded his doctrines and now must reveal the truth." It also says, "Honestly discarding expedient means, I will preach only the unsurpassed way." In the fifth volume we read, "Only the bright jewel that is in his topknot . . .,"<sup>6</sup> "This one jewel exists only on the top of the king's head," and "the way that powerful ruler did when he took the bright jewel he had guarded for so long and finally gave it away."

The import of these passages is this: The great collection of scriptures has been brought to this country of Japan, numbering 7,399 volumes, and each one of these various scriptures is a follower and retainer of the Lotus Sutra. To illustrate, the men and women in this country number 4,994,828, but all are subjects of one man, the ruler of the country.

As for the significance of these various scriptures, let me give an analogy that even an uncomprehending woman can understand immediately. Suppose that one is building a great pagoda. In addition to the lumber to be used in the pagoda itself, one gathers together a large quantity of small timbers and uses them to build a scaffolding ten or twenty feet in height. After one has done this, one uses the original lumber to construct the pagoda. And when the pagoda is completed, one then removes the scaffolding and discards it, leaving the pagoda in place.

Now the scaffolding represents the various other sutras, and the great pagoda, the Lotus Sutra. When the Buddha preached the other sutras, he was in effect erecting a scaffolding in preparation for the preaching of the Lotus Sutra.

In the same manner as the sutra describes when it says, "honestly discarding expedient means," persons who put their faith in the Lotus Sutra should first cast aside and fling away the Namu Amida Butsu invocation based on the Amida and other sutras, the teachings of the True Word school based on the Mahavairochana and other sutras, and the two hundred and fifty precepts of the Precepts school based on the Agama sutras, and other teachings, and then they should embrace the Lotus Sutra alone. When one is preparing to build a great pagoda, the scaffolding is of great importance. But once the pagoda is completed, then the scaffolding is removed and thrown away. This is the meaning of the passage about "honestly discarding expedient means."

Though the scaffolding is necessary to complete the pagoda, no one would ever dream of discarding the pagoda and worshiping the scaffolding. And yet the people who seek the way in the world today spend their whole lives reciting Namu Amida Butsu only, and never once chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. They are like persons who discard the pagoda and worship the scaffolding. They are examples of the secular saying, "seemingly wise, but actually foolish."

The late Shichiro Goro did not take after other people in Japan today. Though still a youth, he followed in the footsteps of his sagacious father. And at an early age, having not yet turned twenty, he began chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, and thus he became a Buddha. This is what the sutra means when it says, "Then not a one will fail

to attain Buddhahood."<sup>7</sup> I hope that, if you, his loving mother, are thinking with longing about your son, you will chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and pray to be reborn in the same place as the late Shichiro Goro and your husband, the late Nanjo.

The seeds of one kind of plant are all the same; they are different from the seeds of other plants. If all of you nurture the same seeds of Myoho-renge-kyo in your hearts, then you all will be reborn together in the same land of Myoho-renge-kyo. When the three of you are reunited there face to face, how great your joy will be!

Now when we open the Lotus Sutra and read what it says, we find these words "The Thus Come One will cover them with his robe, and they will also be protected and kept in mind by the Buddhas who are now present in other regions."<sup>8</sup>

The meaning of this passage is that the Buddhas of the ten directions will all assemble in throngs and fill in the lands to the east, west, north, and south, in the eight directions, the major world system, and all the four hundred ten thousand million nayutas of lands. They will be seated side by side like the stars in the heavens, or the rows of rice and hemp plants on the earth, and will guard and protect the votaries of the Lotus Sutra just as the various ministers and subjects guard and protect the heir of a great ruler.

To be guarded by the four heavenly kings and their retainers is a great honor. But with the protection of all the four heavenly kings, all the stars and constellations, all the deities of the sun and moon, all the Shakras and Brahas, one can be completely confident. Moreover, all the persons of the two vehicles, all the bodhisattvas, Bodhisattva Maitreya in the inner court of the Tushita heaven, Bodhisattva Earth Repository on Mount Kharadiya, Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds

on Mount Potalaka, and Bodhisattva Manjushri on Mount Clear and Cool, each together with all their followers, will guard and protect the votaries of the Lotus Sutra, so one may indeed rest assured. And furthermore, Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and the Buddhas of the ten directions will come of their own accord and watch over one through all the hours of the day and night, which is an honor beyond the power of words to express.

It was this splendid sutra that the late Shichiro Goro put his faith in and through which he attained Buddhahood. And today, on the forty-ninth day following his passing, all the Buddhas have surely gathered about him in the pure land of Eagle Peak, seating him on their palms, patting his head, embracing him, and rejoicing, welcoming him with affection as one would welcome a moon that has just risen, or blossoms that have just burst into bloom.

When we consider why the Buddhas of the ten directions throughout the three existences should so firmly protect the Lotus Sutra, we come to understand that it is only natural. For the Lotus Sutra is the father and mother of the Buddhas of the three existences and the ten directions; it is their wet nurse and their lord.

Frogs feed on the sound of their mother's voice, and if they cannot hear their mother's voice, they will not grow. The insect called kalakula feeds on wind, and if the wind does not blow, it will not grow. Fish must have water, and birds depend upon trees to build their nests in. In the same way, for the Buddhas, the Lotus Sutra is their source of life, their sustenance, and their dwelling. As fish live in water, so the Buddhas live in this sutra. As birds dwell in trees, so the Buddhas dwell in this sutra. As the moon's reflection lodges in the water, so the Buddhas lodge in this sutra. You should

understand that, in a land where this sutra does not exist, there can be no Buddhas.

In ancient times there lived a sovereign named King Rinda who ruled over the southern continent of Jambudvīpa. What was it that this king required for sustenance? He listened to the neighing of white horses, and this became his food. As long as the white horses neighed, he grew more youthful, his complexion glowed, his spirit was vigorous, his physical strength remained undiminished, and he was able to conduct the affairs of state justly. Therefore, a great many white horses were gathered and cared for in his country. In this respect, he was like the ruler of Wei,<sup>9</sup> who gathered a great many cranes, or Emperor Te-tsung, who loved fireflies. The white horses would neigh only if there were white swans who were singing, and accordingly, a number of white swans had also been gathered.

One time for some reason all the white swans disappeared, and as a result, the white horses no longer neighed. So the king's sustenance came to an end, and he was like full-blown blossoms that wilt under the dew, or a round moon that becomes shrouded in clouds. When it became apparent that the king was about to expire, his consort, his heir, the high ministers, and all the people throughout the kingdom turned pale, like a child who has just been separated from its mother, and wet their sleeves with tears, crying, "What shall we do? What shall we do?"

In that country there were many followers of non-Buddhist teachings, persons like the Zen and Nembutsu believers, the True Word teachers, and the Precepts priests of our own time. In addition, there were disciples of the Buddha, persons like the members of the Lotus school today. These two groups were on very bad terms, as incompatible as fire and water, or as

hostile toward each other as the peoples called Hu and Yüeh.<sup>10</sup>

The ruler issued a proclamation saying: "If these non-Buddhists cause the horses to neigh, then I will abolish the Buddhist teachings and put my faith entirely in the non-Buddhist doctrines, honoring them as the heavenly deities do Shakra. But if the disciples of the Buddha cause the horses to neigh, then I will cut off the heads of all the non-Buddhists, seize their dwellings, and hand them over to the disciples of the Buddha."

At this the non-Buddhists turned pale with fear, and the disciples of the Buddha fell to lamenting. But since that alone would not resolve matters, the non-Buddhists took their turn first. For seven days they carried out their practices, but no white swans gathered round, and the white horses failed to neigh.

Then it was the turn of the Buddha's disciples, and they were assigned the next seven days for the performance of their prayers. At that time there was a young monk named Ashvaghosha, or Horse Neigh, who, relying upon the Lotus Sutra, the object of devotion for all the Buddhas, for seven days offered his prayers, whereupon white swans came flying to the platform where he was praying. As soon as one of these birds would utter a cry, one of the white horses would neigh. The king, hearing the sound of the neighing, rose up from his sickbed, and all the persons who had gathered there, beginning with the ruler's consort, turned toward Ashvaghosha and bowed to him in reverence.

So the white swans came, one, two, three, then ten, a hundred, and a thousand, filling the kingdom. And the white horses neighed, one horse, two horses, then a hundred, a thousand white horses, all constantly neighing. When the king heard this sound, his face became that of a thirty-year-old

man. His mind was as clear and bright as the sun, and his administration was upright and fair, so that the rain of amrita fell down from the heavens, the common people bowed before his commands as though before a wind, and the kingdom prospered for countless ages.

The Buddhas are similar to this. Many Treasures Buddha, during the time when the Lotus Sutra does not appear, remains extinct; but in an age when this sutra is recited, he makes his appearance in the world. And the same is true of Shakyamuni Buddha and the Buddhas of the ten directions.

Since the Lotus Sutra possesses this wonderful power, how could any person who upholds this sutra be abandoned by the Sun Goddess, by Great Bodhisattva Hachiman, or by Great Bodhisattva Fuji Sengen?<sup>11</sup> This is truly reassuring!

On the other hand, if a country should oppose this sutra, then no matter how sincerely its people may offer up prayers, that country will inevitably experience the seven disasters. You may be certain that it will be overthrown and destroyed by another country, like a ship that encounters a storm in the midst of the ocean, or like grass and trees that are withered by a great drought.

In a similar manner, in Japan today, no matter how prayers are offered up, because the people make light of Nichiren and his followers, the votaries of the Lotus Sutra, none of their various ways of praying are effective, and instead the forces of the great kingdom of the Mongols come to attack. Already the country is on the verge of destruction. Watch carefully from now on. Matters cannot continue as they are at present. You should understand once and for all that this is entirely due to the fact that the people all harbor enmity toward the Lotus Sutra.

It has now been forty-nine days

since your son, the late Shichiro Goro, passed away. Though impermanence is the way of all things, even one who merely hears the news of a person's having passed away finds it hard to bear. How much more deeply, then, must his mother or his wife grieve! I believe I can understand something of your feelings.

Though children may be young in years or more mature, though they may be ugly or even physically handicapped, their parents love them nonetheless. In your case, your child was a son, and in addition, he was blessed in every way, and he had a warm heart. When your husband, the late Ueno, preceded you in death, he was still in the prime of life, and your grief on that occasion was no shallow matter. Had you not been pregnant with his child, I know you would have followed him through fire and water. Yet when this son was safely born, you felt that it would be unthinkable to entrust his upbringing to another so that you could put an end to your life. Thus you encouraged yourself and spent the following fourteen or fifteen years raising your children.

How, then, are you to endure what has happened? You must have thought that in the future you would have two sons to rely upon. And yet on the fifth day of the ninth month of this year,

this younger son, like the moon hidden in the clouds, like blossoms scattered by the wind, passed from sight. As you wondered whether or not you were dreaming, lamenting at how long the dream goes on, you felt that this dream is indeed like reality, and forty-nine days had already passed. And if it is indeed real, how will you bear it? The full-blown flower remains on the tree, while the bud just about to open has withered away. The aged mother remains behind, while the young son has departed. How heartless is the transience of the world!

Now you must shun and abandon this heartless world, entrusting yourself to the Lotus Sutra, in which the late Shichiro Goro placed his faith, and quickly reach the eternally abiding and indestructible pure land of Eagle Peak. Your son's father is on Eagle Peak; his mother remains in the saha world. I sympathize with the feelings of the late Shichiro Goro, who is in the interval between the two of you.

There is much more that I would like to say, but I shall end here.

With my deep respect,  
Nichiren

The twenty-fourth day of the tenth month

Reply to the mother of Ueno



## Background

This letter was written at Minobu in the tenth month of the third year of Koan (1280) to the lay nun Ueno, the mother of Nanjo Tokimitsu. Nichiren Daishonin acknowledges offerings that she had sent him on the occasion of the forty-ninth-day memorial service following the death of her youngest son, Shichiro Goro, and encourages

her in the face of her grief.

The lay nun Ueno was the daughter of Matsuno Rokuro Saemon and the wife of Nanjo Hyoe Shichiro, the steward of Ueno Village in Fuji District of Suruga Province. The lay nun's husband passed away in 1265, while she was pregnant with their youngest son, Shichiro Goro.

Shichiro Goro visited Minobu together with his elder brother Tokimitsu to see the Daishonin on the fifteenth day of the sixth month in 1280. The Daishonin had great expectations for the young man, but he died suddenly, at the age of sixteen, on the fifth day of the ninth month of that same year. No sooner had the Daishonin received the news of Shichiro Goro's death than he wrote a letter of condolence to the lay nun Ueno and Nanjo Tokimitsu.

This present letter is also called *On Intermediate Existence*. "Intermediate ex-

istence" indicates the interval of time between death and rebirth, and was widely believed to last for forty-nine days. On the basis of this belief, people conducted a memorial service on the forty-ninth day.

To reassure the lay nun Ueno that her son has attained Buddhahood, the Daishonin discusses the great benefit gained from embracing the Lotus Sutra, and asserts that a votary of the sutra will be protected by Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and all the other Buddhas.

## Notes

1. A jellylike food made from the root of the konnyaku plant. It is believed to eliminate poisonous substances from the body.

2. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2. This is taken from the passage "The true aspect of all phenomena can only be understood and shared between Buddhas."

3. *Ibid.*, chap. 14.

4. *Ibid.*, chap. 23.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, chap. 14. The following quotations are also from the same chapter. These passages refer to the parable of the priceless gem in the topknot. A king rewards his soldiers for their courage in battle with land, houses, and jewels, but he will not readily part with the priceless gem in his topknot.

Finally, however, he bestows it upon his most courageous warrior. The gem represents the Lotus Sutra, which the Buddha conceals while expounding the provisional teachings.

7. *Ibid.*, chap. 2.

8. *Ibid.*, chap. 10.

9. The ruler of Wei refers to Duke Yi of the state of Wei (r. 668–660 B.C.E.) in China. Te-tsung (742–805) was the ninth emperor of the T'ang dynasty.

10. Hu here refers to tribes living north of China, and Yüeh, to those living south of it.

11. Fuji Sengen refers to the deity worshiped at shrines in the Fuji and other regions.