

The Gift of Clear Sake



I HAVE received all your gifts: one container of clear sake, ten metal pouring pots, one hundred steamed rice cakes, one bucket containing perhaps two *sho* of syrup, a basket of mandarin oranges, and ten skewers of dried persimmons. I have read your message that your joy at the beginning of spring¹ has unfolded like the cherry blossoms and waxed full like the moon.

Your late son Goro comes inevitably to mind. The blossoms that once fell are about to bloom again, and the withered grasses have begun to sprout anew. Why does the late Goro not return as well? Ah, if he were to come back with the evanescent flowers and grasses, then even though we are not Hitomaro,² we would wait by the blossoms; even though we are not tethered horses, we would never leave the grass!

A sutra passage says that children are enemies.³ Perhaps there is reason for this. The bird known as the owl devours its mother, and the beast called *hakei*⁴ destroys its father. A man called An Lu-shan was killed by his son, Shih Shih-ming,⁵ and the warrior Yoshitomo killed his father, Tameyoshi. Thus the sutra has grounds for saying that children are one's enemies.

Another sutra passage says that children are a treasure. The king Wonderful Adornment was destined, after his life had ended, to fall into the hell

called the great citadel of incessant suffering, but he was saved by his son, the prince Pure Storehouse. Not only was he able to escape the sufferings of that great hell, but he became a Buddha called Sal Tree King. A woman called Shodai-nyo, for the faults of greed and stinginess, was confined in the realm of hungry spirits, but she was saved by her son Maudgalyayana and was freed from that realm.⁶ Thus the sutra's statement that children are a treasure is in no way false.

The late Goro was sixteen years old. Not only did he surpass others in his disposition and handsome appearance, but he was fully endowed with a man's strengths and was praised by all. Moreover, his obedience to his parent's will was like water taking the shape of its container or a shadow following a body. You relied upon him as the pillar of your household; you thought of him as your staff upon the road. All the wealth in your family coffers existed for this child; so did the family retainers. You must have been firmly convinced that when you died you would be carried by him on his back to the graveyard, and that there would be nothing left for you to worry about. But lamentably, he has preceded you in death. "Why? Why did this happen? It must be a dream, an illusion! I will wake up; I will wake up!" you must

have thought. But without your having awakened, already one year has given way to the next. You do not know how long you will have to wait. You must feel that, if only he had left word where you could go to meet him, then without wings, you would soar to the heavens, or without a boat, you would cross over to China. If you heard that he was in the bowels of the earth, then how could you fail to dig into the ground?

And yet there is a way to meet him readily. With Shakyamuni Buddha as your guide, you can go to meet him in the pure land of Eagle Peak. The sutra states, "If there are those who hear the Law, then not a one will fail to attain Buddhahood."⁷ This means that, even

if one were to point at the earth and miss it, even if the sun and moon should fall to the ground, even if an age should come when the tides cease to ebb and flow, or even if flowers should not turn to fruit in summer, it could never happen that a woman who chants *Nam-myoho-rence-kyo* would fail to be reunited with her beloved child. Continue in your devotion to faith, and bring this about quickly!

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The thirteenth day of the first
month

Reply to the lay nun Ueno



Background

This letter was written at Minobu in the first month of the fourth year of Koan (1281), the year before the Daishonin's death, to the lay nun Ueno, the widowed mother of Nanjo Tokimitsu.

The title of this letter is taken from the first item on the list of the lay nun Ueno's offerings. According to the lunar calendar, New Year's Day fell somewhere between January 21 and February 19. It was celebrated as the start of spring.

This was the first New Year's Day since Nanjo Shichiro Goro, the lay nun's youngest child, had died about

four months earlier at the age of sixteen. The Daishonin sensed that, despite her outward expressions of good cheer, the joy of the new season would still be overshadowed by her grief. He expresses his profound sympathy for her loss, a loss made sadder still by its contrast with the emergence of new life at the beginning of spring. Explaining that *Nam-myoho-rence-kyo*, the eternal Mystic Law, transcends birth and death, he encourages the lay nun to strengthen her faith and manifest the state of Buddhahood, so that she can quickly be reunited with her son.

Notes

1. According to the lunar calendar, the first month is the beginning of spring.
2. Kakinomoto no Hitomaro (fl. c. 685–705), one of Japan's most outstanding poets. The Daishonin alludes here to a traditional association between poetry and cherry blossoms, which formed the theme of many

verses by both Hitomaro and other classical poets.

3. A paraphrase of a passage in the Contemplation on the Mind-Ground Sutra. The sutra passage mentioned in the next paragraph, which says that children are a treasure, is taken from the same text.

4. A legendary beast resembling a tiger, said to eat its father.

5. Shih Shih-ming (d. 761) was not in fact An Lu-shan's son, but a close subordinate who fought beside him at this time. An Lu-shan (705-757), a military officer in China during the T'ang dynasty, was even-

tually killed in a succession dispute by his real son An Ch'ing-hsü, who was in turn killed by Shih Shih-ming.

6. This story is described in the Service for the Deceased Sutra and cited in *On Offerings for Deceased Ancestors* (p. 817).

7. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.