

Wu-lung and I-lung



I HAVE received one horseload of polished rice (four *to*) and a sack of yams, and respectfully chanted Nam-myoho-rence-kyo.

Myoho-rence-kyo is likened to the lotus. The great mandara flower in heaven and the cherry blossom in the human world are both celebrated flowers, but the Buddha chose neither to compare to the Lotus Sutra. Of all the flowers, he selected the lotus blossom to symbolize the Lotus Sutra. There is a reason for this. Some plants first flower and then produce fruit, while in others fruit comes forth before flowers. Some bear only one flower but much fruit, others send forth many flowers but only one fruit, and still others produce fruit without flowering. Thus there are all manner of plants, but the lotus is the only one that bears flowers and fruit simultaneously. The benefit of all the other sutras is uncertain, because they teach that one must first make good causes and only then can one become a Buddha at some later time. With regard to the Lotus Sutra, when one's hand takes it up, that hand immediately attains Buddhahood, and when one's mouth chants it, that mouth is itself a Buddha, as, for example, the moon is reflected in the water the moment it appears from behind the eastern mountains, or as a sound and its echo arise simultaneously. It is for this

reason that the sutra states, "If there are those who hear the Law, then not a one will fail to attain Buddhahood."¹ This passage means that, if there are a hundred or a thousand people who uphold this sutra, without a single exception all one hundred or one thousand of them will become Buddhas.

In your letter you mention the anniversary of the passing of your compassionate father, the lay priest Matsuno Rokuro Saemon. You say, "Since he left many sons behind, memorial services for him will be conducted in as many different ways. I fear, however, that such ceremonies will be slanderous unless strictly based on the Lotus Sutra." Shakyamuni Buddha's golden teaching states, "The World-Honored One has long expounded his doctrines and now must reveal the truth."² The Buddha Many Treasures gave testimony, declaring, "The Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law . . . all that you [Shakyamuni] have expounded is the truth!"³ And the Buddhas of the ten directions gave credence to the sutra's verity by extending their tongues to the Brahma heaven.⁴

To the southwest, across the ocean from Japan, there is a country named China. In that country, some people believe in the Buddha but not in gods, while others believe exactly the opposite. Perhaps a similar situation existed in the early days of our own country.

Be that as it may, in China there once lived a calligrapher named Wu-lung. In his art he was without peer in the entire country, just as was Tofu or Kozei⁵ in Japan. He hated Buddhism and vowed that he would never transcribe any Buddhist scriptures. As he approached his end, he fell seriously ill. On his deathbed he expressed his last wishes to his son, saying, "You are my son. Not only have you inherited my skill, but you write with an even better hand than I. No matter what evil influence may work upon you, you must never copy the Lotus Sutra." Thereupon blood spurted like fountains from his five sense organs. His tongue split into eight pieces, and his body fell apart in ten directions. Yet his relatives, ignorant of the three evil paths, did not realize that this was an omen that he would fall into hell.

The son's name was I-lung. He, too, proved to be the best calligrapher in China. Obedient to his father's will, he pledged that he would never transcribe the Lotus Sutra. The ruler of the time was named Ssu-ma.⁶ He believed in Buddhism and held the Lotus Sutra in especially high regard. He desired to have this sutra transcribed by an excellent calligrapher—none but the most skilled in all the country—so that he could have a copy of his own. So he summoned I-lung. I-lung explained that his father's will forbade him from doing so and beseeched the ruler to excuse him from the task. Hearing this, the ruler called another calligrapher and had him transcribe the entire sutra. The result, however, was far from satisfying.

The ruler sent again for I-lung and said to him, "Since you say your father's will forbids you, I will not compel you to copy the sutra. I do insist, however, that you at least obey my command to write the titles of its eight volumes." I-lung begged repeatedly to be excused. The ruler, now furious,

said, "Your father was as much my subject as you are. If you refuse to write the titles for fear of being unfilial to him, I will charge you with disobedience of a royal decree." The ruler repeated his strict order several times. I-lung, though unwilling to be unfilial, realized that he could no longer disobey the royal command, so he wrote the titles [of the eight volumes]⁷ of the Lotus Sutra and presented his work to the ruler.

Returning home, I-lung faced his father's grave and, shedding tears of blood, reported, "The ruler commanded me so strictly that, against your will, I wrote the titles of the Lotus Sutra." In his grief at having been unable to escape the offense of being unfilial, he remained by the graveside for three days on end, fasting until he was on the verge of death. At the hour of the tiger (3:00–5:00 A.M.) on the third day, he was almost dead and felt as if he were dreaming. He looked up at the sky and saw a heavenly being, who was like a painting of the god Shakra and whose multitude of followers filled both heaven and earth. I-lung asked him who he was. The heavenly being replied: "Do you not recognize me? I am your father, Wu-lung. While I was in the human world, I adhered to non-Buddhist scriptures and harbored enmity toward Buddhism, particularly toward the Lotus Sutra. For this reason, I fell into the hell of incessant suffering.

"Every day I had my tongue wrenched out several hundred times. Now I was dead, now I was alive again. I kept crying out in agony, alternately looking up to heaven and flinging myself to the ground, but there was no one to heed my screams. I wanted to tell the human world of my anguish, but there was no means of communication. Whenever you insisted upon adhering to my will, your words would either turn into flames and torment me, or be transformed into swords that

rained down from heaven upon me. Your behavior was unfilial in the extreme. However, since you were acting thus in order to abide by my will, I knew I could not entertain a grudge against you, for I was only receiving the retribution for my own deeds.

“While I was thinking thus, a golden Buddha suddenly appeared in the hell of incessant suffering and declared, ‘Even those who have destroyed enough good causes to fill the entire realm of phenomena, if they hear the Lotus Sutra just once, will never fail to attain enlightenment.’ When this Buddha entered the hell of incessant suffering, it was as if a deluge of water had been poured over a great fire. As my agony subsided a little, I joined my palms together in prayer and asked him what kind of Buddha he was. The Buddha replied, ‘I am the character *myo*, one of the sixty-four characters that compose the titles [of the eight volumes] of the Lotus Sutra, which your son, I-lung, is now writing.’ As eight characters form the title of each of the eight volumes,⁸ a total of sixty-four Buddhas appeared and shone like sixty-four full moons, and the utter darkness of the hell of incessant suffering was instantly transformed into a dazzling brilliance. Moreover, in accordance with the principle that any place, without changing its characteristics, is a Buddha land,⁹ the hell of incessant suffering became the Capital of Eternally Tranquil Light. I and all the other inmates became Buddhas seated on lotus blossoms, and we are now ascending to the inner court of the Tushita heaven. This I am reporting to you before anyone else.”

I-lung said, “It was my hand that wrote the titles. How could you have been saved? Moreover, I did not write

them with sincerity. How could it possibly have helped you?” His father replied: “How ignorant you are! Your hand is my hand, and your body is my body. The characters you write are the characters I write. Although you had no faith in your heart, you nevertheless wrote the titles with your hand. Therefore, I have already been saved. Think of a child who sets fire to something and, without the least intention of doing so, causes it to be burned. The same holds true with the Lotus Sutra. If one professes faith in it, one will surely become a Buddha, even though one may not expect it in the least. Now that you understand this principle, never slander the Lotus Sutra. Since we are among the laity, however, we are in a better position to repent of our past slanderous words, no matter how grave they may have been.”

I-lung reported all this to the ruler. The ruler said, “My wish has been answered with splendid results.” From then on, I-lung basked increasingly in the royal favor, and the entire populace of the country came to revere the Lotus Sutra.

The late Goro¹⁰ and the late lay priest Matsuno were, respectively, your son and father. You are the lay priest’s daughter. I believe, therefore, that he must at this very moment be in the inner court of the Tushita heaven. Hoki-bo¹¹ will read and explain this letter to you. Since I wrote in haste, it was impossible to furnish details.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The fifteenth day of the eleventh
month

Reply to the lay nun Ueno



Background

This letter was written at Minobu in the eleventh month of the fourth year of Koan (1281) to the lay nun Ueno, the mother of Nanjo Tokimitsu. The Daishonin was sixty years old when he sent this letter acknowledging the offerings she had made to commemorate the anniversary of the death of her father, the lay priest Matsuno Rokuro Saemon.

The lay nun Ueno's husband was Nanjo Hyoe Shichiro, the steward of Ueno Village in Suruga Province. Her name, Ueno, derived from Ueno Village. She had nine children, including Tokimitsu.

In this letter, the Daishonin first teaches that, just as the lotus bears

flowers and fruit simultaneously, all who believe in the Lotus Sutra are certain to attain Buddhahood. Then, citing the story of the renowned father and son calligraphers in ancient China, Wu-lung and I-lung, the Daishonin assures the lay nun that, when a son or daughter embraces faith in the Lotus Sutra, his or her parents will be able to attain Buddhahood. According to the story, though Wu-lung fell into the state of hell for his hatred of the Lotus Sutra, he was ultimately saved from his suffering by his son's transcribing the titles of the eight volumes of the sutra. This story is found in *The Lotus Sutra and Its Traditions*, a work by the T'ang-dynasty priest Seng-hsiang.

Notes

1. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., chap. 11.
4. Ibid., chap. 21.
5. Tofu refers to Ono no Tofu (894–966), and Kozei to Fujiwara no Kozei (972–1027). They were among the most outstanding Japanese calligraphers of their time.
6. Ssu-ma was a ruler of Ping-chou in the northern part of China. Ssu-ma was probably his official title rather than his name.
7. This means that I-lung wrote the titles on separate pieces of paper to be used on the covers of the eight scrolls of the sutra.
8. The title of each volume of the Lotus Sutra comprises eight Chinese characters:

the five characters of the title, *Myo-ho-ren-ge-kyo*, and the three characters indicating the volume number.

9. *The Annotations on "The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra"* states that living beings in all of the nine worlds can attain Buddhahood just as they are, that is, without changing their individual characteristics. The same principle applies to the insentient environment.

10. Nanjo Shichiro Goro (1265–1280), the fifth son of the lay nun Ueno and a younger brother of Nanjo Tokimitsu. He had shown great promise, but died at the age of sixteen.

11. Hoki-bo was the Buddhist name that Nikko Shonin received in 1258 when he became Nichiren Daishonin's disciple.