

## The Treatment of Illness



Reply to the lay priest Toki.

Nichiren

I HAVE received the unlined robe you sent me through the offices of Saemon.<sup>1</sup> Please inform all those who sent me various offerings that I have received everything he listed. I also wish to acknowledge receipt of the various offerings from the lay priest Ota shown on the list you made. I have written the other part of the teaching I will discuss here in my letter to Saemon. I hope you will ask him to show it to you.

Your letter says that the epidemics are raging all the more fiercely. The illnesses of human beings may be divided into two general categories, the first of which is illness of the body. Physical diseases comprise one hundred and one disorders of the earth element, one hundred and one imbalances of the water element, one hundred and one disturbances of the fire element, and one hundred and one disharmonies of the wind element,<sup>2</sup> a total of four hundred and four maladies. These illnesses do not require a Buddha to cure them. Skilled physicians such as Water Holder and Water Carrier,<sup>3</sup> Jivaka, and Pien Ch'üeh<sup>4</sup> prescribed medicines that never failed to heal physical sickness.

The second category is illness of the mind. These illnesses arise from the

three poisons and are of eighty-four thousand kinds. They are beyond the healing powers of the two deities<sup>5</sup> and the three ascetics [of Brahmanism] or the six non-Buddhist teachers. Medicines prescribed by Shen Nung and Huang Ti<sup>6</sup> are even less effective.

Illnesses of the mind differ greatly in severity. The eighty-four thousand kinds of illnesses of the mind that arise from the three poisons and that afflict ordinary people of the six paths can be treated by the Buddha of Hinayana and his teachings in the Agama sutras, or by the scholars and teachers of the Dharma Analysis Treasury, Establishment of Truth, and Precepts schools. However, if these Hinayana practitioners, in following their teachings, should turn against the Mahayana, or, even though they may not oppose Mahayana Buddhism, if the Hinayana countries think themselves equal to the Mahayana countries, the people will be plagued by sickness. If one attempts to cure such illnesses with Hinayana Buddhism, they will only become worse. They can be treated only by the votaries of the Mahayana sutras. Even within the Mahayana, if adherents of the Flower Garland, Profound Secrets, Wisdom, Mahavairochana, and other provisional Mahayana sutras confuse the inferior with the superior, and insist that the teachings of their schools are equal to

or even surpass the Lotus Sutra, and if the ruler and others in high positions come to accept their assertion, then the three poisons and eighty-four thousand illnesses will all arise. Then, if those followers should try to cure these illnesses with the provisional Mahayana sutras on which they rely, the sicknesses will become all the more serious. Even if they try to use the Lotus Sutra, their efforts will fail because, although the sutra itself is supreme, the practitioners are persons who hold distorted views.

Further, the Lotus Sutra itself is divided into two distinct categories, the theoretical teaching and the essential teaching. One is as different from the other as fire is from water or heaven from earth. The difference is even greater than that between the Lotus Sutra and the sutras that preceded it. These sutras and the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra are certainly different, but still they have some points of similarity. Among the eight teachings expounded by the Buddha, the perfect teaching of the earlier sutras and that of the theoretical teaching are similar to each other.<sup>7</sup> When the Buddha expounded the pre-Lotus Sutra and the theoretical teachings, he assumed different guises such as the inferior manifested body, the superior manifested body, the reward body, and the Dharma body, yet he invariably depicted himself as having attained enlightenment for the first time in this world.

The difference between the theoretical and the essential teachings is that in the former the Buddha is described as having first attained enlightenment during his life [in India], while in the latter he is the Buddha who attained enlightenment in the remote past. This difference is like that between a one-hundred-year-old man and a one-year-old baby. The disciples of these two Buddhas are also as different as fire is from water, to say nothing of the difference between their lands.<sup>8</sup> One who

confuses the essential teaching with the theoretical teaching would not have the sense to distinguish fire from water. The Buddha drew a distinct line between the two in his preaching, but during the more than two thousand years since his passing, no one in the three countries of India, China, and Japan—or for that matter, in the entire land of Jambudvīpa—has clearly understood the difference. Only T'ien-t'ai in China and Dengyo in Japan generally differentiated between the two. And the precept of the perfect and immediate enlightenment, in which the essential teaching is distinguished from the theoretical, still remained to be clarified.<sup>9</sup> In the final analysis, T'ien-t'ai and Dengyo perceived it in their hearts but did not reveal it for three reasons: first, the proper time had not yet come; second, the people had no capacity to accept it; and third, neither had been entrusted with the mission of propagating it. It is today, in the Latter Day of the Law, that the Bodhisattvas of the Earth will appear and propagate it.

The Latter Day of the Law is the proper time for the spread of the essential teaching, so the followers of Hinayana, provisional Mahayana, and the Lotus Sutra's theoretical teachings will receive no benefit from their teachings, even though they are not guilty of any fault. These teachings can be likened to medicines compounded for use in springtime that are ineffective if taken in the fall, or at least not as effective as they are in spring or summer. What is worse, these people are deluded as to the relative superiority of Hinayana and Mahayana, or of the provisional and true teachings. And because the rulers of Japan of previous ages believed in these sutras, and erected temples and donated fields and farmland to the schools they espoused, if the followers of these teachings today were to admit the truth of my assertion that their teachings are inferior, they would have

no way to justify themselves and would in consequence lose the support of the ruler. For this reason, they become enraged, slandering the sutra of the true teaching and doing harm to its votary. The ruler, too, accepting the groundless accusations of the followers of these schools, persecutes the votary because he wishes to side with the majority, because he cannot bear to abandon the teachings honored by the rulers of the previous ages, because he is simply ignorant, or because he despises the votary of the true teaching. As a result, the gods who guard the true teaching, such as Brahma, Shakra, the gods of the sun and moon, and the four heavenly kings, punish the country, and the three calamities and seven disasters occur on an unprecedented scale. Hence the epidemics that have broken out this year as well as last year and in the Shoka era.<sup>10</sup>

Question: If, as you have stated, the benevolent deities inflict punishment on this country because it does harm to the votary of the Lotus Sutra, then epidemics should attack only the slanderers. Why is it that your own disciples also fall ill and die?

Answer: Your question is reasonable. Nevertheless, you are aware of only one side of the situation and not the other. Good and evil have been inherent in life since time without beginning. According to the provisional teachings and the schools based on them, both good and evil remain in one's life through all the stages of the bodhisattva practice up to the stage of near-perfect enlightenment. Hence people at the stage of near-perfect enlightenment or below have faults of some kind, [but not those at the highest stage]. In contrast, the heart of the Lotus school is the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, which reveals that both good and evil are inherent even in those at the highest stage of perfect enlightenment. The fundamental nature of enlighten-

ment manifests itself as Brahma and Shakra, whereas the fundamental darkness manifests itself as the devil king of the sixth heaven. The benevolent deities hate evildoers, and evil demons hate good people. Because we have entered the Latter Day of the Law, it is natural that evil demons should be everywhere in the country, just like tiles, stones, trees, and grasses. Good demons are few because sages and worthies are rare in this world. One would therefore expect to find more victims of the epidemic among Nichiren's followers than among the believers of Nembutsu, or priests of the True Word, Zen, and Precepts schools. For some reason, however, there is less affliction and death among Nichiren's followers. It is indeed mysterious. Is this because we are few in number, or because our faith is strong?

Question: Has there ever in the past been such a terrible outbreak of epidemics in Japan?

Answer: During the reign of Emperor Sujin, the tenth ruler after Emperor Jimmu, epidemics swept Japan, claiming the lives of more than half the populace. But when Emperor Sujin had the people in each province worship the Sun Goddess and other deities, the epidemics ceased completely. Hence the name Sujin, which literally means "worshiping the gods." That was before Buddhism had been introduced to the country. The thirtieth, thirty-first, and thirty-second rulers in the imperial line, along with many of their ministers, died of smallpox and other epidemic diseases. Prayers were once again offered to the same deities, but this time to no avail.

During the reign of the thirtieth ruler, Emperor Kimmie, Buddhist sutras, treatises, and priests were sent from the state of Paekche to Japan, as well as a gilded bronze statue of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings. The Great Minister Soga<sup>11</sup> urged that the statue be worshipped. But the Chief

Minister Mononobe and other ministers, along with the common people, joined in opposing the worship of the Buddha, saying that, if honor were paid to him, it would enrage the native deities who then would bring ruin upon Japan. The emperor was still trying to decide which opinion to follow when the three calamities and seven disasters struck the nation on a scale never known before, and great numbers of the populace died of disease.

The Chief Minister Mononobe seized this opportunity to appeal to the emperor. As a result, not only were the Buddhist priests and nuns disgraced, but the gilded bronze statue of Shakyamuni Buddha was placed upon burning coals and destroyed, and the Buddhist temple was likewise burned. At that time, the chief minister contracted a disease and died, and the emperor also passed away. The Great Minister Soga, who worshiped the Buddha, also fell ill.

The minister Moriya, the chief minister's son, declared that the three successive emperors as well as his own father had died in the epidemic solely because homage had been paid to the Buddha. "Let it be known," he declared, "that Prince Shotoku, Soga no Umako, and the others who revere the Buddha are all enemies of my father and of the deceased emperors!" Hearing this, the imperial princes Anabe and Yakabe,<sup>12</sup> along with their ministers and thousands of retainers, all joined forces with Moriya. Not only did they burn images of the Buddha and their temples, but a battle broke out, and Moriya was killed in the fighting. For a period of thirty-five years after Buddhism had first been brought to this country, not a year passed without seeing the three calamities and seven disasters, including epidemics. But after Mononobe no Moriya was killed by Soga no Umako and the gods were overpowered by the Buddha, the disasters abruptly ceased.

Outbreaks of the three calamities and seven disasters that occurred thereafter were for the most part due to confusion within Buddhism itself. But these would affect only one or two persons, or one or two provinces, one or two clans, or one or two areas. Such disasters occurred because of the curse of the gods, because Buddhism was slandered, or because of the people's distress.

The three calamities and seven disasters of these past thirty years or more, however, are due solely to the fact that the entire country of Japan hates me, Nichiren. In province after province, district after district, and village after village, everyone from the ruler on down to the common people seethes in anger against me such as the world has never seen. This is the first time that the fundamental darkness has erupted in the lives of ordinary people caught in the illusions of thought and desire.<sup>13</sup> Even if they pray to the gods, the Buddha, or the Lotus Sutra, these calamities will only be aggravated. But it is different when the votary of the Lotus Sutra offers prayers to the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra. In the final analysis, unless we succeed in demonstrating that this teaching is supreme, these disasters will continue unabated.

The Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai in his *Great Concentration and Insight* described the ten objects of meditation and the ten meditations, but no one after him practiced them. In the days of Miaolo and Dengyo some people practiced them to an extent but encountered few difficulties because there were no powerful opponents. The three obstacles and four devils described in *Great Concentration and Insight* will not arise to obstruct those who practice the provisional sutras. But now each and every one has risen to confront me. They are even more powerful than the three obstacles and four devils that T'ien-t'ai, Dengyo, and others had to face.

There are two ways of perceiving

the three thousand realms in a single moment of life. One is theoretical, and the other, actual. What T'ien-t'ai and Dengyo practiced was theoretical, but what I practice now is actual. Because what I practice is superior, the difficulties attending it are that much greater. The doctrine of T'ien-t'ai and Dengyo was the three thousand realms in a single moment of life of the theo-

retical teaching, while mine is that of the essential teaching. These two are as different as heaven is from earth. You should grasp this deeply when the time comes to face death.

With my deep respect,  
Nichiren

The twenty-sixth day of the sixth  
month



## Background

This letter was originally thought to have been written in 1282, but it now seems more likely that it was 1278. The month and the day of the letter is exactly the same as that on a letter written to Saemon, commonly known as Shijo Kingo, which may very well be the letter mentioned in the first paragraph.

This letter was a reply to Toki Jonin, who had anxiously written about the rampant epidemic. The Daishonin first classifies all diseases into two categories, physical and mental. Physical illness, he says, can be cured by skilled physicians. However, illnesses of the mind, he adds, are more complicated. Those that arise from the three poisons can be treated with the Hinayana teachings, but those caused by slandering the correct or "essential" teaching can be cured only with the essential teaching. The Daishonin uses this term to indicate the Law of Nam-myoho-rence-kyo that, he says, lies in the depths of the "Life

Span" chapter of the Lotus Sutra.

In the Latter Day of the Law, he says, evil demons prevail, attacking the votaries of the Lotus Sutra. "One would therefore expect," the Daishonin tells Toki Jonin, "to find more victims of the epidemic among Nichiren's followers than among" the believers of the other schools. "However," he adds, "there is less affliction and death among Nichiren's followers."

In closing, the Daishonin points to the way to end the epidemic. The only way to do so is to demonstrate clearly that "this teaching" of Nam-myoho-rence-kyo is supreme. By this, he means participating in and winning public debate on the relative superiority of the Buddha's teachings. Then he clarifies the difference between the three thousand realms in a single moment of life expounded by T'ien-t'ai and Dengyo and what he himself expounds. He identifies this doctrine as Nam-myoho-rence-kyo.

## Notes

1. Saemon is another name for Shijo Kingo. "My letter to Saemon" mentioned later in this paragraph refers to *The Two Kinds of Illness*, dated the twenty-sixth day of the sixth month, 1278.

2. Earth, water, fire, and wind were regarded as the constituent elements of all

things, according to ancient Indian belief. In the case of the human body, earth corresponds to flesh, bone, skin, and hair; water, to blood and other liquids; fire, to body temperature; and wind, to the function of breathing. "One hundred and one" in each case here does not necessarily indicate an

exact number but simply a great many.

3. A father and son, both excellent physicians, mentioned in the Golden Light Sutra. According to that sutra, they lived countless kalpas ago. At one time, an epidemic broke out and spread throughout their country. Water Holder was too old to perform medical treatment, but Water Carrier mastered the medical arts and, in his father's place, saved the people.

4. Pien Ch'üeh was a physician of the Spring and Autumn period (770-403 B.C.E.) in China. In his boyhood he learned the medical arts and is said to have been skilled in treating almost all diseases.

5. Shiva and Vishnu.

6. Two of the Three Sovereigns, legendary ideal rulers of ancient China. They were also said to have been skilled in medical matters and were revered as patron deities and the inventors of certain medicines, according to *Records of the Historian*.

7. The perfect teaching of the theoretical teaching is closer to that of the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings than that of the essential teaching. The first two teachings explain, as does the essential teaching, that people can become Buddhas in this life, but, unlike the essential teaching, they never reveal the seed of Buddhahood. Moreover, the Buddha who preached the first two teachings is the one who attained enlightenment in his life in India, while the Buddha who expounded the essential teaching is the one who did so countless kalpas ago.

8. These two Buddhas are the Buddha of the theoretical teaching and that of the essential teaching. Though they both refer to Shakyamuni, they express the two different positions he assumes in the theoretical and essential teachings, as is mentioned in this paragraph. The land of the Buddha of the theoretical teaching is held to be somewhere apart from this saha world, and the Buddha appears in the saha world only temporarily to expound the Law and save people. In contrast, the essential teaching reveals that the saha world itself is the land where the Buddha has always dwelt since his original enlightenment.

9. The term "essential teaching" has

two meanings: the essential teaching of Shakyamuni's lifetime, or the latter fourteen chapters of the Lotus Sutra, as contrasted with the theoretical teaching, or the first fourteen chapters; and the essential teaching of the Latter Day of the Law, or Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism of Nam-myoho-enge-kyo. When the "essential teaching" is defined in this latter sense, the entire twenty-eight-chapter Lotus Sutra is regarded as the theoretical teaching. Both here and in the following paragraph, the Daishonin uses the term "essential teaching" to indicate Nam-myoho-enge-kyo. As explained in *The Selection of the Time*, Dengyo established the precepts of the perfect and immediate enlightenment based on Shakyamuni's Lotus Sutra. In speaking of the precept that "still remained to be clarified," the Daishonin indicates the Law of Nam-myoho-enge-kyo.

10. That is, in 1259.

11. Soga no Iname (d. 570), an official who engaged in a struggle for power with the Chief Minister Mononobe no Okoshi, leader of the conservative faction at court.

12. Anabe (d. 587), also called Anahobe, was a son of Emperor Kimmei, and his mother was the daughter of Soga no Iname. According to *The Chronicles of Japan* and other sources, he could not ascend the throne upon the death of Emperor Bidatsu, and made another attempt to seize power at the death of Emperor Yomei, conspiring with Mononobe no Moriya. However, he is said to have been killed by Soga no Umako, who supported another crown prince, Hatsusebe (Emperor Sushun). Yaka-be (d. 587), one of Prince Anabe's closest friends, was also killed along with Anabe.

13. The fundamental darkness is said to usually erupt in the lives of those who have overcome the first two of the three categories of illusions, that is, the illusions of thought and desire and the illusions numerous as the particles of dust and sand. In this case, however, the Daishonin points out that quite unusually, the fundamental darkness has erupted in the lives of ordinary people caught in the first of the illusions.