

## The Two Kinds of Illness



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 of the water element, one hundred and one of the fire element, and one hundred and one of the wind element, for a total of four hundred and four maladies.<sup>1</sup> These illnesses can be cured with the medicines prescribed by skilled physicians such as Water Holder, Water Carrier,<sup>2</sup> Jivaka, and Pien Ch'üeh.<sup>3</sup>

The second category is illness of the mind. These are the three poisons and the eighty-four thousand illnesses.<sup>4</sup> Only a Buddha can cure them; thus they are beyond the healing powers of the two deities and the three ascetics,<sup>5</sup> not to mention those of Shen Nung and Huang Ti.<sup>6</sup>

Illnesses of the mind differ greatly in severity. The three poisons and the eighty-four thousand illnesses that afflict ordinary people of the six paths can be treated by the Buddha of the Dharma Analysis Treasury, Establishment of Truth, and Precepts schools, which derive from the Tripitaka teaching of Hinayana. However, if one tries to use the Hinayana teachings to cure the three poisons and eighty thousand illnesses that arise from slandering the Mahayana sutras, such as the Flower

Garland, Wisdom, and Mahavairochana sutras, these illnesses will merely become worse and never be cured. They can be treated only with the Mahayana teachings. Moreover, if one attempts to use the Flower Garland, Wisdom, and Mahavairochana sutras, or the teachings of the True Word and Three Treatises schools to cure the three poisons and eighty thousand illnesses that arise when the practitioners of the various Mahayana sutras oppose the Lotus Sutra, those sicknesses will become all the more serious. To illustrate, the flames emitted by burning wood or coal can easily be extinguished by water, but if one pours water over a fire produced by burning oil, it will only burn more intensely, the flames mounting still higher.

The epidemics that have been raging in Japan since last year cannot be categorized within the four hundred and four illnesses of the body. Thus they are beyond the healing powers of Hua T'o<sup>7</sup> and Pien Ch'üeh. Nor do they correspond to any of the eighty-four thousand diseases that can be treated with the Hinayana or provisional Mahayana teachings. For this reason, the prayers offered by the priests of the schools based on those teachings not only fail to end the epidemics, but rather aggravate them all the more. Even if the epidemics should subside this year,

they will surely break out again in years to come. Probably they will come to an end only after something dreadful has happened.

The Lotus Sutra says, "Though he might practice the art of medicine and by its methods cure someone's disease, the person would grow sicker from some other malady and perhaps in the end would die. . . . it would only make his condition worse."<sup>8</sup> The Nirvana Sutra states: "At that time King Ajatashatru of Rajagriha . . . boils broke out over his entire body. . . . [The king said to his mother], 'These boils have their origin in the mind; they do not arise from the four elements. Though people say that there is a physician who can cure them, that could not possibly be.'" Miao-lo said, "Wise men can perceive the cause of things, as snakes know the way of snakes."<sup>9</sup>

The present epidemics are like the virulent boils of King Ajatashatru that could not be cured by anyone but the Buddha. They can only be eliminated by the Lotus Sutra.

I developed diarrhea on the thirtieth day of the twelfth month of last year, and up until the third or fourth day of the sixth month of this year, it grew more frequent by the day and more

severe by the month. Just when I was thinking that it must be my immutable karma, you sent me good medicine. Since taking it, my complaint has diminished steadily and is now a mere one-hundredth fraction of its former intensity. I wonder if Shakyamuni Buddha has taken possession of your body to help me, or perhaps the Bodhisattvas of the Earth have bestowed upon me the good medicine of Myoho-renge-kyo. Chikugo-bo<sup>10</sup> will explain all this to you in more detail.

Postscript: Your messenger arrived at the hour of the dog (7:00–9:00 P.M.) on the twenty-fifth day of this month. The things you have sent me are beyond counting. Please convey my appreciation to Toki for his offering of a summer robe. Also please tell your wife how saddened I am at the passing of her grandfather.

With my deep respect,  
Nichiren

The twenty-sixth day of the sixth month

Reply to Nakatsukasa Saemon-no-jo



## Background

This letter was written at Minobu and sent to Shijo Kingo in Kamakura in the first year of Koan (1278). Its content closely resembles that of another letter, *The Treatment of Illness*, written to Toki Jonin on the same date. Indeed, the opening passage is virtually identical to the one in *The Treatment of Illness* (p. III).

The Daishonin's life at Minobu was by no means easy. Winters were bitterly cold, and his shelter was inadequate.

Food was another problem. Moreover, for nearly the entire first half of 1278, he had suffered from debilitating and chronic diarrhea. Shijo Kingo, who was well versed in the art of healing, had prescribed a medicine and sent it to the Daishonin, along with other offerings. This letter expresses the Daishonin's appreciation for Kingo's offerings.

The Daishonin refers to two kinds of illness: illness of the body, which arises primarily from physical causes, and ill-

ness of the mind, which arises from the three poisons. He explains that, although illness of the body can be cured by sufficiently skilled physicians, illness of the mind cannot; only Buddhism provides a remedy for such disorders. He also attributes the epidemics then

ravaging Japan to slander of the Lotus Sutra. Neither the Hinayana nor provisional Mahayana teachings will be able to stem them, he says. Faith in the Lotus Sutra alone will eradicate the offense of slander and remove the people's suffering.

## Notes

1. Earth, water, fire, and wind were regarded by ancient Indians as the constituent elements of all things. In terms of the human body, earth corresponds to flesh, bone, skin, and hair; water, to blood and sweat; fire, to body temperature; and wind, to the function of breathing. The number "one hundred and one" indicates not an exact number of illnesses, but rather simply a great many.

2. Water Holder and Water Carrier are father and son, both excellent physicians mentioned in the Golden Light Sutra. At one time, an epidemic broke out and spread throughout their country. Water Holder was too old to provide treatment, but Water Carrier mastered the medical arts and, in his father's stead, saved the people from the ravages of the epidemic.

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

4. "Eighty-four thousand illnesses" here simply means a great many. Hereafter these are referred to as either eighty-four thousand or eighty thousand illnesses. These ill-

nesses arise from the three poisons inherent in human life.

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

6. Shen Nung and Huang Ti are two of the Three Sovereigns, legendary ideal rulers of ancient China. According to *Records of the Historian*, they are also said to have been skilled in medical matters, and were revered as the patron deities and inventors of medicine.

7. Hua T'o was a physician of the Later Han (25-220), said to have been especially skilled in surgery. When acupuncture and medicine proved ineffectual, he would give the patient narcotics and perform surgery. He devised a system of physical exercises that he himself practiced. As a result, he is said to have been active and vigorous even at the age of one hundred.

8. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.

9. *The Annotations on "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra."*

10. Chikugo-bo is another name for Nichiro (1245-1320), one of the Daishonin's six senior priest-disciples.