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A Ship to Cross the Sea of Suffering



WHEN I asked him about what you told me the other day, I found it to be exactly as you said. You should therefore strive in faith more than ever to receive the blessings of the Lotus Sutra. Listen with the ears of Shih K'uang and observe with the eyes of Li Lou.¹

In the Latter Day of the Law, the votary of the Lotus Sutra will appear without fail. The greater the hardships befalling him, the greater the delight he feels, because of his strong faith. Doesn't a fire burn more briskly when logs are added? All rivers flow into the sea, but does the sea turn back their waters? The currents of hardship pour into the sea of the Lotus Sutra and rush against its votary. The river is not rejected by the ocean; nor does the votary reject suffering. Were it not for the flowing rivers, there would be no sea. Likewise, without tribulation there would be no votary of the Lotus Sutra. As T'ien-t'ai stated, "The various rivers flow into the sea, and logs make a fire burn more briskly."²

You should realize that it is because of a profound karmic relationship from the past that you can teach others even a sentence or phrase of the Lotus Sutra. The sutra reads, "Nor will they hear the correct Law—such people are difficult to save."³ The "correct Law" means the Lotus Sutra; it is difficult to

save those who are deaf to the teachings of this sutra.

A passage from the "Teacher of the Law" chapter reads: "If one of these good men or good women [in the time after I have passed into extinction is able to secretly expound the Lotus Sutra to one person, even one phrase of it, then you should know that] he or she is the envoy of the Thus Come One." This means that anyone who teaches others even a single phrase of the Lotus Sutra is the envoy of the Thus Come One, whether that person be priest or layman, nun or laywoman. You are already a lay practitioner and therefore one of the "good men" described in the sutra. One who listens to even a sentence or phrase of the sutra and cherishes it deep in one's heart may be likened to a ship that crosses the sea of the sufferings of birth and death. The Great Teacher Miao-lo stated, "Even a single phrase cherished deep in one's heart will without fail help one reach the opposite shore. To ponder one phrase and practice it is to exercise navigation."⁴ Only the ship of Myoho-enge-kyo enables one to cross the sea of the sufferings of birth and death.

The Lotus Sutra speaks of "someone finding a ship in which to cross the water."⁵ This "ship" might be described as follows: As a shipbuilder of

infinitely profound wisdom, the World-Honored One of Great Enlightenment, the lord of teachings, gathered the lumber of the four flavors and eight teachings, planed it by honestly discarding the provisional teachings, cut and assembled the planks, forming a perfect unity of both right and wrong,⁶ and completed the craft by driving home the spikes of the one true teaching that is comparable to the flavor of ghee. Thus he launched the ship upon the sea of the sufferings of birth and death. Unfurling its sails of the three thousand realms on the mast of the one true teaching of the Middle Way, driven by the fair wind of “the true aspect of all phenomena,”⁷ the vessel surges ahead, carrying aboard all people who can “gain entrance through faith alone.”⁸ The Thus Come One

Shakyamuni is at the helm, the Thus Come One Many Treasures takes up the mooring rope, and the four bodhisattvas led by Superior Practices row quickly, matching one another as perfectly as a box and its lid. This is the ship in “a ship in which to cross the water.” Those who are able to board it are the disciples and lay supporters of Nichiren. Believe this wholeheartedly. When you visit Shijo Kingo, please have an earnest talk with him. I will write you again in more detail.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The twenty-eighth day of the fourth month

To Shiji Shiro



Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter at Kamakura in the first year of Kocho (1261), about two weeks before he was exiled to Ito in Izu. Virtually nothing is known about the recipient, Shiji Shiro, other than that he lived in the province of Suruga and was acquainted with two of the Daishonin’s leading disciples, Shijo Kingo and Toki Jonin.

The title of this letter is drawn from

a passage in the “Medicine King” chapter of the Lotus Sutra that speaks of “a ship in which to cross the water.” In this letter, the Daishonin teaches that the daimoku of the Lotus Sutra is the “ship” that can unfailingly transport one across the sea of life’s inevitable sufferings to the distant shore of enlightenment.

Notes

1. Shih K’uang, in Chinese legend, was a court musician whose sense of hearing was so keen that he could judge the quality of a newly cast bell, where ordinary musicians could not. Li Lou’s sight was so acute that he could see the tip of a hair at a hundred paces.

2. *Great Concentration and Insight*.

3. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.

4. *The Annotations on “The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra.”* “The opposite shore” represents nirvana, or enlightenment, while this shore where we live represents

illusion.

5. Lotus Sutra, chap. 23.

6. “Forming a perfect unity of both right and wrong” means that both good and evil are eternally inherent in life. Provisional sutras hold that wicked people cannot attain enlightenment, but the Lotus Sutra reveals that even such people possess the Buddha nature, giving the example of Devadatta attaining Buddhahood.

7. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.

8. *Ibid.*, chap. 3.