

The Origin of the Service for Deceased Ancestors



YOU went to the trouble to send me by messenger a donation for the service for your deceased ancestors of one *to* of polished rice as white as snow, a bamboo container of oil like well-aged sake, and one thousand coins. In particular, I was very much moved by the contents of your letter.

The service for deceased ancestors has its origins in the events arising from the Venerable Maudgalyayana's attempts to save his mother, Shodai-nyo, who, because of her karma of greed and stinginess, had fallen into the world of hungry spirits for a period of five hundred lifetimes. He failed, however, to make his mother a Buddha. The reason was that he himself was not yet a votary of the Lotus Sutra, and so he could not lead even his mother to Buddhahood. At the eight-year assembly on Eagle Peak, he embraced the Lotus Sutra and chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, and became Tamalapattra Sandalwood Fragrance Buddha.¹ At this time, his mother also became a Buddha.²

You also asked about offerings for the hungry spirits. The third volume of the Lotus Sutra says, "Suppose that someone coming from a land of famine should suddenly encounter a great king's feast."³ This passage is explaining that the four great voice-hearers,⁴ who were of intermediate capacity, had not

yet even heard of the delicacy called ghee, but when this sutra was expounded, they savored its taste to their hearts' content for the first time, thus bringing an end at once to the hunger that had long been in their hearts. Therefore, when you make offerings to the hungry spirits, you should recite that passage from the sutra and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo for their repose.

Generally speaking, hungry spirits are divided into thirty-six kinds. Among these, caldron-shaped hungry spirits are ones with no eyes or mouth. If you ask what sort of cause from the past exists for this, it is because, while they were in this world, they did such things as attacking people under cover of night or committing robberies. Vomit-eating hungry spirits feed on what people have vomited up. The cause of this is the same as that mentioned above. It is also because they robbed people of their food. Thirst-consumed hungry spirits are ones that drink things like the water that people offer out of filial piety to their deceased parents. Property-possessing hungry spirits⁵ are ones that drink the water from horses' hooves. This is because, while alive, they begrudged their property and concealed their food. Property-less hungry spirits⁶ are ones who have not heard even the name of

food or drink since the time of their birth.

Law-devouring hungry spirits are people who renounce the world and spread Buddhism. They think that if they preach the Law people will respect them, and because of their ambition for fame and profit, they spend their entire present lifetime striving to be thought of as better than others. They neither help other human beings nor have a mind to save their parents. Such people are called Law-devouring hungry spirits, or hungry spirits who use the Buddhist teachings to satisfy their own desires.

When we observe the priests of our time, we find some who secretly accept offerings for themselves alone. In the Nirvana Sutra they are described as dog-like priests. In their next life they will become ox-headed demons.⁷ We also find persons who, though they receive offerings openly, being greedy, never share them with others. In their next existence they will be born as horse-headed demons.

Also, some lay believers fail to pray for the repose of their parents who, having fallen into hell or the realm of hungry spirits or of animals, are undergoing excruciating agonies. These believers are luxuriously clad and fed, have an abundance of cattle, horses, and retainers, and enjoy themselves as they please. How their parents must envy and resent them! Even among priests, those who pray for the repose of their parents and teachers on the anniversaries of their death are rare. Certainly the gods of the sun and moon in the heavens and the deities on earth must be angry and indignant with them, considering them to be unfilial. Though they possess a human form, they are like animals. They should also be called human-headed beasts.

When I think that I will surely eradicate these karmic impediments and in

the future go to the pure land of Eagle Peak, though various grave persecutions fall on me like rain and boil up like clouds, since they are for the sake of the Lotus Sutra, even these sufferings do not seem like sufferings at all. Those who have become the disciples and lay supporters of such a Nichiren—especially your deceased mother, Myoho, the anniversary of whose death falls on the twelfth day of this month—are votaries of the Lotus Sutra and my lay supporters. How could she possibly have fallen into the world of hungry spirits? No doubt she is now in the presence of Shakyamuni Buddha, Many Treasures Buddha, and the Buddhas of the ten directions. Perhaps they are saying, “So this is the mother of Shijo Kingo!” and, with one accord, patting her on the head and praising her joyfully. And she is probably saying to Shakyamuni Buddha, “What a splendid son I have.”

The Lotus Sutra says: “If there are good men or good women who, on hearing the ‘Devadatta’ chapter of the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law, believe and revere it with pure hearts and harbor no doubts or perplexities, they will never fall into hell or the realm of hungry spirits or of beasts, but will be born in the presence of the Buddhas of the ten directions, and in the place where they are born they will constantly hear this sutra. If they are born among human or heavenly beings, they will enjoy exceedingly wonderful delights, and if they are born in the presence of a Buddha, they will be born by transformation⁸ from lotus flowers.”⁹ The phrase “good women” is found in this passage of the sutra. If it does not refer to the deceased, Myoho, then to whom does it refer? The sutra also states, “This sutra is hard to uphold; if one can uphold it even for a short while I will surely rejoice and so will the other Buddhas. A person who can do this wins the admiration of the Buddhas.”¹⁰ My

praise of your mother counts for little, but the sutra says that she “wins the admiration of the Buddhas.” Thinking, “How encouraging, how encouraging!” you should apply yourself earnestly to faith. Nam-myoho-rence-kyo, Nam-myoho-rence-kyo.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The twelfth day of the seventh
month

Reply to Shijo Kingo



Background

This letter was written to Shijo Kingo, a samurai and one of Nichiren Daishonin's most loyal followers, in the seventh month of the eighth year of Bun'ei (1271). Shijo Kingo had sent various offerings to Nichiren Daishonin as a donation for a memorial service to be held for his mother, who had passed away some years before on the twelfth day of the seventh month. The Daishonin wrote Kingo this letter in reply, explaining that, in the profoundest sense, only the act of chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo benefits the deceased.

Traditionally held in Japan on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, the service for deceased ancestors is a Buddhist observance honoring the spirits of the ancestors. This tradition originated in China and is based on the story of Maudgalyayana's saving his deceased mother that is related in the Service for the Deceased Sutra. Records indicate that the service for deceased ancestors was first held in China in 538, and in Japan in 657. Recent scholarship has established that the Service for the

Deceased Sutra has its origins not in India, but in China, where filial piety was highly valued.

According to popular belief in Kamakura-period Japan, those who were greedy or egotistic in life would inevitably suffer from hunger in death. In this letter, the Daishonin discusses the various kinds of hungry spirits mentioned in Buddhist texts and explains the causes, that is, the evil acts they committed in past existences, that led them to acquire these forms.

The Daishonin also exposes the true motives of many of the priests of his day, referring to them as “Law-devouring hungry spirits” who use the Buddhist teachings as a means to gain personal fame and profit. Though they pretend to have a sincere desire to preach the Buddhist teachings, in their hearts they are greedy. They conceal the offerings they receive from others, keeping them to themselves. The Daishonin also censures those Buddhists, whether of the priesthood or of the laity, who neglect to pray for the repose of their deceased parents or teachers.

Notes

1. This name is found in chapter 6 of the Lotus Sutra. The eight-year assembly indicates the assembly at which the Lotus Sutra was expounded.

2. According to the Service for the Deceased Sutra, Maudgalyayana tried unsuccessfully with his supernatural powers to

save his deceased mother, Shodai-nyo, who was suffering in the world of hungry spirits. He sought the advice of Shakyamuni, who urged him to offer one hundred kinds of food to the monks on the fifteenth day of the seventh month (the last day of the monks' three-month retreat during the

rainy season). Maudgalyayana did as the Buddha instructed, and his mother was relieved of her agony. Here the Daishonin interprets the story in the light of the Lotus Sutra and the daimoku of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, that is, the sutra's essence.

3. Lotus Sutra, chap. 6.

4. Maudgalyayana, Mahakashyapa, Katyayana, and Subhuti.

5. Hungry spirits who have property, but begrudge sharing it with others, and who have an insatiable desire for even more.

6. Hungry spirits who have no property.

7. Beings who, together with horse-headed demons, are said to act as jailors in

the hell of crushing, the third of the eight hot hells. These two kinds of demons are depicted as having the bodies of human beings and the heads of oxen or horses.

8. "Born by transformation" refers to one of the four forms of birth. Due to their karma, beings so born are said, upon the end of their previous lifetime, to appear suddenly in this fashion without the help of parents or other intermediary agency. This passage may be interpreted to mean that one attains the state of Buddhahood by manifesting one's inherent Buddha nature.

9. Lotus Sutra, chap. 12.

10. Ibid., chap. 11.