

The Persecution at Tatsunokuchi



I CANNOT adequately express my gratitude for your frequent letters. At the time of my persecution on the twelfth, not only did you accompany me to Tatsunokuchi,¹ but also you declared that you would die by my side. This can only be called wondrous.

How many are the places where I have thrown away my life in past existences for the sake of my wife and children, lands and followers! I have given up my life on the mountains and the seas, on the rivers, on the seashore, and by the roadside. Never once, however, did I die for the Lotus Sutra or suffer persecution for the daimoku. Hence none of the ends I met enabled me to attain Buddhahood. Because I did not attain Buddhahood, the seas and rivers where I threw away my life are not Buddha lands.

In this life, however, as the votary of the Lotus Sutra, I was exiled and put to death—exiled to Ito and beheaded at Tatsunokuchi. Tatsunokuchi in Sagami Province is the place where Nichiren gave his life. Because he died there for the Lotus Sutra, how could it be anything less than the Buddha land? The sutra reads, “In the Buddha lands of the ten directions there is only the Law of the one vehicle.”² Does this not bear out my assertion? The “Law of the one vehicle” is the Lotus Sutra. No true teaching other than the Lotus Sutra

exists in any of the Buddha lands of the ten directions. The sutra continues, “There are not two, there are not three, except when the Buddha preaches so as an expedient means.”³ This being so, then every place where Nichiren meets persecution is the Buddha land.

Of all the places in the saha world, it is at Tatsunokuchi in Katase of Sagami Province in Japan that Nichiren’s life dwells. Because he gave his life there for the sake of the Lotus Sutra, Tatsunokuchi deserves to be called the Land of Tranquil Light. This is what the “Supernatural Powers” chapter means when it states, “Whether in a garden, a forest . . . or in mountain valleys or the wide wilderness . . . in such places have the Buddhas entered nirvana.”

You accompanied Nichiren, vowing to give your life as a votary of the Lotus Sutra. Your deed is a hundred, thousand, ten thousand times greater than that of Hung Yen,⁴ who cut open his stomach and inserted the liver of his dead lord, Duke Yi [to save him from shame and dishonor]. When I reach Eagle Peak, I will first tell how Shijo Kingo, like myself, resolved to die for the Lotus Sutra.

I have heard unofficially that by the order of the lord of Kamakura⁵ I am to be exiled to Sado Province. Among the three heavenly sons of light, the god of

the moon saved my life at Tatsunokuchi by appearing as a shining object, and the god of the stars descended four or five days ago to greet me.⁶ Now only the god of the sun remains, and he is certain to protect me. How reassuring! How encouraging! The “Teacher of the Law” chapter states, “I will dispatch persons magically conjured who will act to guard and protect them.” This passage leaves no room for doubt. The “Peaceful Practices” chapter reads, “Swords and staves will not touch him.”

The “Universal Gateway” chapter states, “The executioner’s sword will be broken to bits!” There is nothing false in these sutra passages. The strong and steadfast power of faith is precious indeed.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The twenty-first day of the ninth month in the eighth year of Bun’ei (1271)

To Shijo Kingo



Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter to his loyal samurai follower Shijo Kingo in 1271, in the ninth month, on the twenty-first day, only nine days after the Tatsunokuchi Persecution. The Daishonin had been sentenced to exile on Sado Island under the supervision of Hojo Nobutoki, the constable of Sado. Originally it was intended that the Daishonin be escorted to Echi, to the residence of Homma Shigetsura, Hojo Nobutoki’s deputy; from here he was to be taken directly to Sado. But Hei no Saemon, a high government official and avowed enemy of the Daishonin, arbitrarily decided to have the Daishonin executed as he was being escorted to Homma’s residence. An attempt was made to behead the Daishonin at Tatsunokuchi, but it was unsuccessful. The Daishonin’s exile was later carried out as it had been originally planned.

The Daishonin here reveals something about his true identity, which he

later describes in greater detail in *The Opening of the Eyes*, also given to Shijo Kingo. Here he states, “Tatsunokuchi in Sagami Province is the place where Nichiren gave his life. Because he died there for the Lotus Sutra, how could it be anything less than the Buddha land?” Why is it that the Daishonin states, “he died,” when in fact he survived the attempted execution? *The Opening of the Eyes* explains this when it says, “On the twelfth day of the ninth month of last year, between the hours of the rat and the ox (11:00 P.M. to 3:00 A.M.), this person named Nichiren was beheaded. It is his soul that has come to this island of Sado” (p. 269). The Daishonin is implying that, though the ordinary person called Nichiren died at Tatsunokuchi, Nichiren, the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law, reached Sado Island safely in order to fulfill his mission.

Notes

1. A place near Kamakura used as an execution site.
2. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.
3. Ibid.

4. Hung Yen (d. 660 B.C.E.) was a loyal retainer in ancient China whose lord, Duke Yi, was slain in battle. Hung Yen sacrificed his own life to prevent the desecration of

his lord's body. The liver was considered the seat of the spirit.

5. The lord of Kamakura is another name for Hojo Tokimune (1251–1284), the eighth regent of the Kamakura government.

6. The reference to the god of the moon indicates the bright object that appeared in the sky just prior to the Daishonin's scheduled execution, which frightened his executioners to the extent that they aborted their attempt on his life. It is generally thought that this was a meteor.

Regarding the reference to the god of the stars, the Daishonin records in his work *The Actions of the Votary of the Lotus Sutra* that, while he was confined at Homma's residence in Echi, a luminous object fell from the sky and struck the branches of a plum tree before him. It is not clear what this was, though it may have been a lightning-related electrical discharge—the Daishonin mentions a thunder-like roar and strong winds in his description.