

The Swords of Good and Evil



NICHIREN is the most perverse person in Japan. The reason is this: Nichiren proclaims that, because the people revere the Buddha Amida, the Thus Come One Mahavairochana, Medicine Master, and other Buddhas even more than their own parents and lords, the three calamities and seven disasters are occurring in greater magnitude than in any previous age, and the unusual disturbances in the heavens and strange occurrences on earth are now more terrible than ever. I am forever reminding them that they will not only ruin themselves and destroy the country in this lifetime, but fall into the great Avichi hell in the next. Hence I have suffered this severe persecution. I might be compared to a summer insect that flies into a flame, or a mouse that dashes in front of a cat. I am like an animal that knows it is in danger and yet pays no heed. But I risk my life as a matter of conscious choice; therefore, I am a perverse person.

Stones are split open for their hidden gems, deer are slain for their hides and meat, fish are caught for their flavor, the kingfisher is killed for its gorgeous feathers, and a beautiful woman is envied for her beauty. This is the case with me. Because I am the votary of the Lotus Sutra, I have suffered all manner of persecution at the hands of the three powerful enemies. How wondrous that you

have, nonetheless, become a disciple and a supporter of such a person! There must be some profound reason for our relationship. Make every possible effort to deepen your faith, and reach the pure land of Eagle Peak.

I have received the two swords—a long one and a short one—that you sent as an offering for prayers. The long sword must have been made by a renowned swordsmith. It is fully equal to the celebrated swords Amakuni, Onikiri, and Yatsurugi,¹ or to those famous Chinese swords Kan-chiang and Mo-yeh.² You have offered this sword to the Lotus Sutra. While you wore it at your side, it was an evil sword, but now that it has been offered to the Buddha, it has become a sword for good, just like a demon who conceives a desire to attain the Buddha way. How wondrous, how wondrous!

In the next life you should use this sword as your staff. The Lotus Sutra is the staff that helps all the Buddhas of the three existences as they set their minds on enlightenment. However, you should rely on Nichiren as your staff and pillar. When one uses a staff, one will not fall on treacherous mountain paths or rough roads, and when led by the hand, one will never stumble. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo will be your staff to take you safely over the mountains of death. The Buddhas

Shakyamuni and Many Treasures, as well as the four bodhisattvas headed by Superior Practices, will lead you by the hand on your journey. If I, Nichiren, precede you in death, I will come to meet you at your last moment. If you should precede me, I will be sure to tell King Yama all about you. Everything that I tell you is true. According to the Lotus Sutra, Nichiren is the guide who knows the passes and gorges along the way. Devote yourself single-mindedly to faith with the aim of reaching Eagle Peak.

Money serves various purposes according to our needs. The same is true of the Lotus Sutra. It is a lantern in the dark or a boat at a crossing. At times it is water and, at times, fire. This being so, the Lotus Sutra assures us of "peace and security in our present existence and good circumstances in future existences."³

Of all the many places in Japan, Nichiren was born in the province of Awa. It is said that the Sun Goddess

first dwelt in this province, where she began exploring the land of Japan. An estate exists there dedicated to the goddess, who is the compassionate father and mother to all living beings in this country. Therefore, this province must be of great significance. What karma from the past caused Nichiren to be born in this same province? No reward could be greater. That is not the main point of this letter, so I will not go into further detail. But you should think about what I mean.

You must pray to the heavenly gods with all your heart. Be ever diligent in your faith so that your desire will be fulfilled. Please tell your wife all that I have said.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The twenty-first day of the second
month

Reply to Lord Yagenta



Background

This letter was written to Hojo Yagenta, a lay believer in Kamakura, on the twenty-first day of the second month; though no year is indicated, it is believed to be 1274. The letter was sent by the Daishonin from Ichinosawa on Sado Island seven days after a pardon for him was issued in Kamakura. Although the official date of the pardon was the fourteenth of that month, it did not reach the Daishonin until the eighth day of the third month.

Yagenta was a samurai who belonged to the ruling Hojo clan. He was a recipient in 1268 of one of the eleven

letters the Daishonin wrote remonstrating with top government officials and religious leaders after a delegate from Khubilai Khan arrived demanding tribute.

For a samurai, the sword was the embodiment of status and strength. Swords were also symbols of power and death, but the Daishonin explains that because Yagenta has offered his to the Lotus Sutra their basic nature has changed for the good. Yagenta's act amounts to a demonstration of faith and devotion. Some years later he became a lay priest.

Notes

1. The Amakuni sword was made by a swordsmith of the same name during the Nara period (710–794). The Onikiri sword was a cherished possession of the Minamoto clan. The Yatsurugi sword is thought to be the sacred sword of Yatsurugi Shrine, associated with Atsuta Shrine in present-day Nagoya.

2. Kan-chiang and Mo-yeh were a husband and wife who forged two superb swords for the king of Wu; the swords were named after them.

3. Lotus Sutra, chap. 5.