Persecution by Sword and Staff

The greatest of all the persecutions that I have suffered were the attempted beheading at Tatsuno-kuchi and the attack at Tojo. None of the others were direct attempts on my life. I have been reviled, denounced, ousted, falsely accused, and struck across the face, but these were all comparatively minor incidents. I, Nichiren, am the only person in Japan to be abused in both body and mind [on account of the Lotus Sutra]. If anyone else has been slandered as I have, it was not because of the Lotus Sutra. One incident in particular I can never forget is how Sho-bo seized the fifth scroll of the Lotus Sutra and struck me across the face with it. His attack on me stemmed from the three poisons.

Once in India there was a jealous woman who hated her husband so much that she smashed everything in the house. Her excessive rage completely altered her appearance; her eyes blazed like the sun and moon, and her mouth seemed to belch fire. She looked exactly like a blue or red demon. She seized the fifth scroll of the Lotus Sutra, which her husband had been reciting for some years, and trampled it savagely with both feet. Later she died and fell into hell, all of her except for her feet. Though the wardens of hell tried to force them down by beating them with iron staves, her feet remained outside of hell as a result of the relationship, albeit a reverse one, that they had formed with the Lotus Sutra by trampling on it. Sho-bo struck me in the face with the fifth scroll of the Lotus Sutra because he hated me. Thus he too has formed a reverse relationship with this sutra.

One incident occurred in India, the other in Japan; one was perpetrated by a woman, and the other by a man; in one, a pair of feet committed the violence, and in the other, a pair of hands; one happened because of jealousy, and the other because of the Lotus Sutra. However, the same fifth scroll of the sutra was involved in both instances. The woman’s feet did not enter hell, so why should Sho-bo’s hands fall into the hell of incessant suffering? The woman, however, hated only her husband and not the Lotus Sutra itself, whereas Sho-bo hated both the Lotus Sutra and me, Nichiren. Therefore, his entire body will enter the hell of incessant suffering. As the sutra states, “When his life comes to an end he will enter the Avichi hell.” There is no mention of his hands being spared. How pitiful, how truly pitiful! Eventually, however, he will meet me again and be able to gain the fruit of Buddhahood, just as the four kinds of believers who arrogantly persecuted Bodhisattva Never Dispar-
aging were ultimately saved by him. 6

The fifth scroll contains the very
core of the Lotus Sutra, for it reveals
that the dragon king’s daughter at-
tained Buddhahood in her present
form. Devadatta represents the spiritual
aspect of enlightenment, and the drag-
on king’s daughter, the physical aspect.
The principle of attaining Buddhahood
in one's present form can be found
nowhere else in the Buddha's entire life-
time of teachings. The Great Teacher
Dengyo enumerated ten outstanding
points in which the Lotus Sutra surpasses
all others. 7 One of them is the
sutra's “superiority in leading people
to attain Buddhahood in their present
form.” This is the most important doc-
trine of the Tendai school, and a sec-
tion of The Words and Phrases of the Lo-
tus Sutra is devoted to this teaching of
attaining Buddhahood in one's present
form. It is also a point of controversy
between the True Word and Tendai
schools. The dragon king's daughter at-
tained Buddhahood through the power of
the Lotus Sutra. Bodhisattva Man-
jugshri stated, “I constantly expounded
the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law
alone.” 8 The words “alone” and “con-
stantly” are the core of this statement.
However, The Treatise on the Mind Aspi-
ring for Enlightenment reads, “Only in the
True Word teachings [can one attain
Buddhahood in one's present form].”
Which is one to accept, “only” or
“alone”? The word “only” in the trea-
 haste must be an error [in translation]. 9

The Immeasurable Meanings Sutra
states, “In these more than forty years,
I have not yet revealed the truth.” The
Lotus Sutra reads, “The World-Hon-
ored One has long expounded his doc-
trines and now must reveal the truth.”10
Many Treasures Buddha affirmed that
only the Lotus Sutra enables one to
attain Buddhahood in one’s present
form when he said, “All that you have
expounded [in the Lotus Sutra] is the
truth!”11 No matter how firmly the
sutras preached before the Lotus Sutra
guarantee the attainment of Budhha-
hood, and no matter how much the
believers in these provisional doctrines
may wildly insist that this is so, it is as
easy to refute these assertions as it is to
smash a thousand earthen cooking
dishes with a single hammer. This is
what is meant by the statement “The
Lotus Sutra is the teaching of shaku-
buku, the refutation of the provisional
doctrines.” 12 The Lotus Sutra is indeed
the most profound teaching.

Ever since Jikaku, scholars of the
Tendai school have interpreted the pas-
sages from the three major works—
The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra,
Words and Phrases, and Great Concen-
tration and Insight—in one way or an-
other, and have given plausible expla-
nations. Their views, however, are as
useless to us now as last year's calendar
or yesterday's meal. You should pay no
attention to a person who says that in
the first five hundred years of the Lat-
er Day of the Law there exists a way to
enlightenment apart from the daimoku
of the Lotus Sutra, even if this were the
Buddha's teaching. How much more so
if it was the opinion of some teacher.
The “Devadatta” chapter of the Lotus
Sutra states that Devadatta was the
teacher of the Thus Come One Shakyam-
uini in some past existence. He who
was once the teacher is now the dis-
ciple, and he who is now the disciple
was formerly the teacher. In pondering
this chapter, I, Nichiren, have realized
that it reveals the profound meaning of
the Lotus Sutra through the oneness of
past and present, and the inseparability
of the one who teaches and the one who
learns. Therefore, the merciful Thus
Come One Shakyamuni became the
teacher of the wicked Devadatta, and
the wise Manjushri became the teacher
of the ignorant daughter of the dragon
king. Certainly I can in no way be infe-
rior to Manjushri or to the Thus Come
One Shakyamuni. The men of Japan are
like Devadatta, and the women are like the dragon king’s daughter. Whether by following it or opposing it, they will attain Buddhahood through the Lotus Sutra. This is the message of the “Devadatta” chapter.

Next, we come to the “Encouraging Devotion” chapter. Only I, Nichiren, have read with my entire being the twenty-line verse from this chapter, which the eight hundred thousand million nayutas of bodhisattvas proclaimed in a single voice. Since the Buddha’s passing, who else in the three countries of India, China, and Japan has ever read this verse as I have? No one even claims to have done so, nor do I believe that anyone has. The verse reads, “[There will be many ignorant people who will...] attack us with swords and staves.” Perhaps others have been beaten with staves, but I have never heard of any who were injured by the sword.

We know that Bodhisattva Never Disparaging was attacked with staves, as is written in the sutra, “Some among the group would take sticks of wood or tiles and stones [and beat and pelt him],” but he was not persecuted by the sword. T’ien-t’ai, Miao-lo, and Dengyo also escaped persecution by sword and staff, as the sutra states, “Swords and staves will not touch him.”13 I, Nichiren, have met with persecution by both sword and staff. As I mentioned before, I was attacked with a sword at Matsubara14 in Tojo and later at Tatsunokuchi. No one else has met with such persecution [for the sake of the Lotus Sutra] even once, but I have met with it twice. As for being attacked with staves, I have already been struck in the face by Sho-bo with the fifth scroll of the Lotus Sutra. The fifth scroll was used as a staff to strike me, and it is this very scroll that carries the passage that [votaries of the Lotus Sutra] will be attacked with staves. What a mysterious passage of prediction! Sho-bo hit me before dozens of people, and, though I knew it was for the sake of the Lotus Sutra, being an ordinary person, I felt miserable and ashamed. Had I had the strength, I would have wrested it from him, trampled on and broken it, and thrown it away. However, it was in fact the fifth scroll of the Lotus Sutra.

This brings to mind a story.15 A father, anxious about his son’s future, thrashed the boy with a bow made of zelkova wood because he refused to study. At the time, the son resented his father’s action and hated the zelkova bow. However, he applied himself to his studies so much that eventually he [mastered Buddhism], thereby achieving emancipation himself and benefiting others. In retrospect, he saw that he owed his achievements to his father’s thrashings. It is said that he erected a memorial tablet made from a zelkova tree for the repose of his deceased father.

It is the same with me. When I attain Buddhahood, how will I be able to forget my obligation to Sho-bo? Much less can I forget the thanks I owe to the scroll of the Lotus Sutra [with which he struck me]. When I think of this, I cannot restrain my tears of gratitude.

The “Emerging from the Earth” chapter also explains something about me, because it states that Bodhisattva Superior Practices and his followers will appear in the Latter Day of the Law to propagate the five characters of Nam-myoho-RENge-Kyo. I, Nichiren, have appeared earlier than anyone else. How reassuring to think that I will no doubt be praised by bodhisattvas equal in number to the sands of sixty thousand Ganges Rivers! Be that as it may, commit yourself to the Lotus Sutra and have faith in its teachings. You must not only believe in them yourself, but also encourage others to do the same, so that you may save those who were
your parents in all your past existences. From the time that I was born until today, I have never known a moment's ease; I have thought only of propagating the daimoku of the Lotus Sutra. I do not know how long I or anyone else may live, but without fail, I will be with you at the time of your death and guide you from this life to the next. All the Buddhas of the past, present, and future attain enlightenment during the hours of the ox and the tiger. In all three countries of India, China, and Japan, the place of Buddhist prayer is located to the northeast, in the direction of the demon gate. These are profound teachings of Buddhism, which are reverently transferred from teacher to disciple. I will explain in more detail later.

With my deep respect.

As you crave food when hungry, seek water when thirsty, long to see a lover, beg for medicine when ill, or as a beautiful woman desires powder and rouge, so should you put your faith in the Lotus Sutra. If you do not, you will regret it later.

Nichiren

The twentieth day of the fourth month in the second year of Koan (1279), cyclical sign tsuchinoto-u

Reply to Ueno

Background

This letter was written to Nanjo Tokimitsu, the steward of Ueno Village in Fuji District of Suruga Province, in the fourth month of 1279. The Daishonin's life at Minobu was entering upon its fifth year; Nikko Shonin was actively propagating the teaching in the Atsuhara area near Mount Fuji in Suruga.

In the body of this letter, Nichiren Daishonin explains the significance of the chapters, from the "Devadatta" (twelfth) through the "Emerging from the Earth" (fifteenth), contained in the fifth volume or scroll of the Lotus Sutra, in terms of his own enlightenment. He reveals the profound meaning of the persecutions "with swords and staves" that befell him, particularly when he was struck with the fifth scroll of the Lotus Sutra just before the attempted execution at Tatsunokuchi. The "Encouraging Devotion" (thirteenth) chapter, especially the twenty-line verse section, enumerates the types of persecutions that votaries of the Lotus Sutra will undergo in the fearful latter age after Shakyamuni Buddha's passing. Nichiren Daishonin declares that only he has lived out this chapter's predictions, thus identifying himself as the votary of the Lotus Sutra. By citing the "Emerging from the Earth" chapter, the Daishonin equates himself with Bodhisattva Superior Practices, and also hints at his identity as the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law.

Notes

1. Tatsunokuchi was the name of the execution grounds in Kamakura where the deputy chief of military and police affairs, Hei no Saemon, attempted to behead the Daishonin in 1271. The attack at Tojo refers to the Komatsubara Persecution. On the eleventh day of the eleventh month, 1264, the Daishonin was ambushed by Tojo Kagenobu, the steward of Tojo Village in Awa, and his men. He received a sword cut on his forehead and had his hand broken.

2. Sho-bo is a title indicating the deputy
or vice chief of a government ministry, and it is surmised that there were several individuals of the same title. Here reference is to a Sho-bo who was originally a follower of the Daishonin's teachings, but later abandoned his faith. When Hei no Saemon went to arrest the Daishonin on the twelfth day of the ninth month, 1271, he accompanied him as his retainer. The fifth scroll or volume, wrapped around a wooden staff, includes four chapters, from the twelfth through the fifteenth. Included therein is the so-called twenty-line verse section of the “Encouraging Devotion” (thirteenth) chapter, which states that votaries of the Lotus Sutra will be attacked with swords and staves.

3. The source of this story is not known. A somewhat similar story, but involving a Chinese woman, appears in The Lotus Sutra and Its Traditions.

4. A blue or red demon refers to the demons that punish the denizens of hell.

5. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.

6. This story is found in the “Never Disparaging” chapter of the Lotus Sutra. Bodhisattva Never Disparaging practiced the Lotus Sutra, and because of their slander of the sutra, the people—priests and nuns, laymen and laywomen—fell into the hell of incessant suffering. Eventually, however, due to the reverse relationship they had formed with the Lotus Sutra, they met Never Disparaging again and were able to attain enlightenment.

7. These are enumerated in the third volume of The Outstanding Principles of the Lotus Sutra. The following sentence refers to the eighth principle.

8. Lotus Sutra, chap. 12. According to this chapter, the dragon king’s daughter conceived the desire for enlightenment when she heard Bodhisattva Manjushri preach the Lotus Sutra in the dragon king’s palace. Later, she appeared before the assembly at Eagle Peak and attained enlightenment immediately, without changing her dragon form.

9. The Daishonin attributes this error to the translation of The Treatise on the Mind Aspiring for Enlightenment done by Pu-k’ung of the True Word school. In The Doctrine of Attaining Buddhahood in One’s Present Form, the Daishonin asks if rejecting the above treatise does not amount to rejecting its author, Nagarjuna, and answers, “It is more likely that the translator distorted the meaning according to his personal views” (p. 1056). Obviously Nagarjuna could not have missed the Lotus Sutra’s description of the dragon king’s daughter attaining Buddhahood in her present form.

10. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.

11. Ibid., chap. 11.


14. This refers to what is now commonly known as Komatsubara.

15. The following story appears in Tales from the Three Countries. The son later became Ensho (883–967), a chief priest of Enryaku-ji.

16. The hours 1:00 to 5:00 A.M., which Buddhism traditionally regards as a crucial interval in which, according to Chinese tradition, life moves from the negative (yin) to the positive (yang), from sleep to waking, or from death to life.

17. The direction of the demon gate refers to the inauspicious direction, that is, northeast. In both Kyoto and Edo (now Tokyo) Buddhist temples were built to the northeast, the direction of the demon gate, to protect the cities against evil forces. Enryaku-ji on Mount Hiei, for instance, was built to the northeast of Kyoto.