156

Great Bodhisattva Hachiman

I HAVE received the white quilted robe and the ten *ryo* of cotton that you were kind enough to send. The year is drawing to a close, and here in the mountains where I live, the wind blows fiercely, and my little dwelling is as full of holes as a wicker basket. I have the leaves of plants for my floor covering and wear clothes made of paper,[1] so that my body becomes as cold as a stone, and the things I have to eat are like ice. When I received the quilted robe, I thought that I would put it on immediately and get warm, but you had written that it was for New Year's Day of the coming year. I wonder if even the Venerable Mahakashyapa, who retired to Mount Kukkutapada to await the coming of the Compassionate Honored One[2] 5,670 million years in the future, could feel as impatient as I do.

But enough of that. Shiiji Shiro told me that you have been discussing the Buddhist teachings in the presence of your lord, which delights me no end. In reward, I will write to you now about a very important doctrine.

Most people, both the wise and the ignorant, will tell you that Great Bodhisattva Hachiman is a manifestation of Amida Buddha, and this claim is not without reason. In the documents of middle antiquity and in oracles from Hachiman himself, there have been a few instances when he was identified with Amida Buddha.[3] This has come about because people have each at heart become Nembutsu believers, so that they are like someone who mistakes a red stone for a lump of gold, or who looks at a stump in the field and sees a hare.[4]

The truth is that Hachiman is a manifestation of Shakyamuni Buddha. I say this because in the province of Osumi there is an inscription on a stone to that effect.[5] That stone is now broken into two. On one part are written the two characters of the name Hachiman. The other part bears this inscription: "Long ago on Eagle Peak he preached the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law. Now he has manifested himself as the Great Bodhisattva and resides in the main shrine." This is the first proof that Hachiman is Shakyamuni Buddha.

But there is even more definite proof. Great Bodhisattva Hachiman's father was Emperor Chuai, the fourteenth human sovereign of Japan, and his mother was Empress Jingu, the fifteenth sovereign. [Their son] Emperor Ojin, the sixteenth sovereign, was the one now known as Great Bodhisattva Hachiman.

His father, Emperor Chuai, being commanded by the Sun Goddess, was about to cross the ocean to attack the

kingdom of Silla. But the king of Silla put a curse on him, and as a result Emperor Chuai passed away at Hakata.[6] At that time his consort, Empress Jingu, was already pregnant with the prince. But in order to avenge the late emperor, she amassed a force of several tens of thousands of horsemen and crossed the sea to the kingdom of Silla.

While the ship was still on the waves, she could feel that the hour had come for her child to be born. At that time Empress Jingu addressed the babe in her womb, saying: "Are you a prince, or are you a girl child? If you are a prince, then listen well to what I say. I am crossing over to the land of Silla in order to attack the enemy of your father, Emperor Chuai. Since I am only a woman, I want you to act as my commander in chief. If you are destined to be the sovereign of Japan, then you must not be born just now, but must remain in my womb during the time of battle and from there serve as commander in chief to my tens of thousands of horsemen and carry out the attack on your father's enemy. But if you do not heed my words and instead insist upon being born at once, then I will cast you into the sea. You must not bear a grudge against me!"

The child accordingly remained in the womb as before. At that time the empress donned a belt made of stones in order to chill her womb and proceeded on her way to Silla where she subjugated the kingdom. When she returned to Japan, she went to Usa Shrine in the province of Buzen, and there her child was born. He had been in the womb for three years, six months, and three days, and was born on the eighth day of the fourth month of a year with the cyclical sign *kinoe-tora*. This was the child who was later to be known as Emperor Ojin. At the age of eighty, he passed away on the fifteenth day of the second month of a year with the sign *mizunoe-saru*. He is the chief god of Mount Otokoyama, a guardian deity to the dynasty that rules our country. His enshrined form is not particularly unusual, but he is nevertheless revered for his mysterious powers. He is the deity now known as Great Bodhisattva Hachiman.

Now the Thus Come One Shakyamuni was born in the kalpa of continuance in the ninth period of decrease, when the human life span measured a hundred years. His father was King Shuddhodana, and his mother, Lady Maya. He was born in the state of Kapilavastu in central India, in a place called Lumbini Gardens, on the eighth day of the fourth month of a year with the sign *kinoe-tora*. After living for eighty years, he passed away on the bank of the Ajitavati River at Kushinagara in eastern India on the fifteenth day of the second month of a year with the sign *mizunoe-saru*. It was the same with the present Great Bodhisattva Hachiman. Though one was born in India and the other in Japan, and though they had different fathers and mothers, both were born on the eighth day of the fourth month of a year with the sign *kinoe-tora* and died on the fifteenth day of the second month of a year with the sign *mizunoe-saru*.

During the 2,220 and more years since the Buddha passed away, whether in India, China, Japan, or anywhere else in the entire land of Jambudvipa, those born as sages and worthies are all said to have been manifestations of the Thus Come One Shakyamuni. But no one has ever heard of such a coincidence as the one I have just pointed out.

In addition to this strange coincidence, there is the matter of Great Bodhisattva Hachiman's vow. When he preached the Lotus Sutra [as Shakyamuni Buddha] in India, he said, "Honestly discarding expedient means,"[7] and in Japan he vowed that he would make his residence on the heads of honest

persons. Nevertheless, on the fourteenth day of last month, the eleventh month, at the hour of the rat (11:00 P.M.–1:00 A.M.), he burned down his sacred shrine[8] and ascended to the heavens. If we consider the reason, we will see that, though this deity had vowed to reside on the heads of honest persons, there were no longer any honest persons on whose heads he might reside. Being thus left without a dwelling place, he ascended to the heavens.

But the strangest thing of all in this country of Japan is the fact that, although its people have been born in a land related to the Thus Come One Shakyamuni, they have discarded this Buddha, and all, every one of them alike, have become followers of Amida Buddha. They have cast aside Shakyamuni, with whom they have a deep bond, and pay reverence to Amida Buddha, with whom they have no connection at all.[9]

In addition, they have taken the day when Shakyamuni Buddha, their father, passed away, and assigned it to Amida Buddha, and taken the day when he was born, and assigned it to Medicine Master [Buddha]. And though they appear to pay reverence to Great Bodhisattva Hachiman, they claim that his true identity is Amida Buddha. Not only have they discarded both true identity and manifestation,[10] but they treat as an enemy anyone who tries to point out their error. That is no doubt the reason why this deity, Hachiman, being powerless to correct the situation, has ascended to the heavens.

The moon will cast its image on water, but its reflection will not dwell in muddy water. However, it will be mirrored even in the drops of dew on the trees above and on the leaves of the grass, if the dew is clear and pure. And in the same way, Hachiman will undoubtedly take up his residence on the head of an honest person, even though that person may not be the ruler of the nation.

Hachiman has vowed to take up residence on the heads of a hundred rulers.[11] And yet he did not reside on the heads of the five rulers of our nation, namely, the eighty-first sovereign, Emperor Antoku; the eighty-second sovereign, the Retired Emperor of Oki; the eighty-third sovereign, the Retired Emperor of Awa; the eighty-fourth sovereign, the Retired Emperor of Sado; and the eighty-fifth sovereign, the emperor of Higashi Ichijo.[12] He declined to do so because they had the heads of men who are fawning and crooked. Instead, he took up residence on the heads of Yoritomo and Yoshitoki, though these men were mere servants of the throne. This was no doubt because they were honest men.

On considering this, we can see that, because persons who put their faith in the Lotus Sutra are following an honest doctrine, Shakyamuni Buddha himself will protect them. How then could it happen that Great Bodhisattva Hachiman, who is his manifestation, would fail to protect them?

Though water may be pure at the outset, if it becomes muddied, the moon does not shine in it. But even though night soil is filthy, when it clears, the moon does not begrudge its reflection. The muddied water may be pure in nature, yet the moon does not shine in it. But the night soil, though impure in nature, reflects the moon's rays when it clears.

The muddy water may be likened to learned priests and eminent scholars who keep the precepts but turn their backs on the Lotus Sutra. The night soil may be likened to ignorant people without precepts whose greed is profound and whose anger is intense, but who put undivided faith in the Lotus Sutra alone.

The scripture known as the Nirvana Sutra lists the beings that have been

able to attain the way through the Lotus Sutra, and the list includes such filthy creatures as dung beetles, vipers, and scorpions. To express the wonderful power of the Lotus Sutra, Bodhisattva Nagarjuna says that it enables even such creatures as dung beetles to attain Buddhahood.[13]

The Nirvana Sutra also refers to persons who cannot become Buddhas even through the Lotus Sutra, defining them as icchantikas, or those of incorrigible disbelief, who appear to be like arhats, or like great bodhisattvas. They are like the muddy water that, though originally pure, does not reflect the moonlight. Thus Great Bodhisattva Hachiman, because he hates dishonesty, has ascended to the heavens. But when he sees the votaries of the Lotus Sutra, how could he begrudge shedding his light on them?

My followers should believe the truth of this matter firmly. Great Bodhisattva Hachiman dwells with us here. Have no doubt about it! Have no doubt about it!

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The sixteenth day of the twelfth month

Reply to the wife of Shijo Kingo

Background

This letter was written at Minobu in the twelfth month of the third year of Koan (1280) to Nichigen-nyo, the wife of Shijo Kingo, but its contents suggest that it was intended for them both.

The body of the letter deals with Hachiman, who, along with the Sun Goddess, was one of the major deities in Japanese mythology. The identification of Hachiman with Emperor Ojin is thought to have developed during the Nara (710–794) and Heian (794–1185) periods. Later, Hachiman became the object of veneration favored by the warrior class. Minamoto no Yoritomo, founder of the Kamakura shogunate, established a shrine to him in Kamakura.

Hachiman also provides an early example of the melding of Buddhist and Shinto elements. With the spread of Buddhism in Japan, the Japanese deities came to be viewed as local manifestations of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and Hachiman was granted the title Great Bodhisattva by the imperial court in the early Heian period.

By the Kamakura period (1185–1333), with the increasing popularity of Pure Land beliefs, most people had begun to regard Great Bodhisattva Hachiman as a manifestation of Amida Buddha. In this letter Nichiren Daishonin sharply criticizes this view and states unequivocally that Hachiman is a manifestation of Shakyamuni Buddha. He offers two pieces of evidence in support of this claim: a stone inscription in the province of Osumi, and the coincidence of Shakyamuni Buddha and Emperor Ojin, who was identified with Hachiman, having exactly the same birth and death dates. The Daishonin's description of the birth of Emperor Ojin differs in some particulars from the accounts given in *The Records of Ancient Matters* and *The Chronicles of Japan,* the earliest Japanese histories. Different versions of these texts and various traditions concerning historical events may have been in circulation in the Daishonin's time.

The Daishonin then offers his interpretation of the destruction by fire of

Hachiman Shrine in Kamakura, which had occurred the month before. News of this event may in fact have prompted the choice of subject for this letter. Hachiman, the Daishonin says, once vowed to reside "on the heads of honest persons." The fact that he has now abandoned his shrine and ascended to the heavens can only mean that there are no longer any honest persons in the country; all have abandoned the "honest doctrine" of the Lotus Sutra. However, the Daishonin concludes, the votaries of the Lotus Sutra are none other than "honest persons," and Hachiman surely continues to protect them.

Notes

1. This refers to a kind of garment made by gluing together sheets of thick Japanese paper. It was then crumpled to make it pliable and treated with persimmon tannin.

2. The Compassionate Honored One refers to Bodhisattva Maitreya. Some accounts view him as a historical personage who preceded the Buddha in death. He is said to have been reborn in the Tushita heaven and to be preaching there. It is prophesied that he will reappear in this world 5,670 million years after Shakyamuni's death, attain Buddhahood, and save the people in Shakyamuni's stead.

3. "Middle antiquity" here indicates the Nara (710–794) and Heian (794–1185) periods. The Daishonin is probably referring to some unspecified documents of this period. According to *The Genko Era Biographies of Eminent Priests,* a ninth-century priest called Gyokyo prayed at Usa Hachiman Shrine to see the god's original form. Thereupon Amida Buddha and his attendants appeared in his presence.

4. Reference is to a Chinese folktale. One day, when a farmer was plowing, he saw a hare run into a stump and break its neck. He thereupon abandoned his plow and stood guard by the stump, hoping to catch other hares in the same way. However, his strategy was unsuccessful, and he was ridiculed by others.

5. This stone is said to have stood in the precincts of Hachiman Shrine in Osumi Province, an area in what is now Kagoshima in the southern part of Kyushu. The stone itself no longer exists, but the inscription is quoted in a work by the Zen priest Nampo Gensho (1555–1620).

6. An area in northern Kyushu, once a center of foreign trade, international exchange, and national defense.

7. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2. The sentence reads: "Honestly discarding expedient means, I will preach only the unsurpassed way."

8. "His sacred shrine" refers to Hachiman Shrine in Kamakura, which burned down on the fourteenth day of the eleventh month, 1280.

9. Shakyamuni Buddha proclaims in chapter 16 of the Lotus Sutra, "Ever since then I have been constantly in this saha world, preaching the Law, teaching and converting." Thus those who live in this world have a deep connection with Shakyamuni. Other Buddhas such as Amida and Medicine Master, however, dwell in different realms of the universe. Amida is the Buddha of the Pure Land of Perfect Bliss in the west, and Medicine Master is the Buddha of the Pure Emerald World in the east.

10. This expression refers to the idea that indigenous Japanese deities were local manifestations of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, who were their true identity. As this concept developed, correspondences were established identifying which deity was a manifestation of which Buddha or bodhisattva. The phrase "discarded both true identity and manifestation" means that, in rejecting Shakyamuni Buddha, who is Hachiman's true identity, people have in effect rejected Hachiman as well.

11. This refers to an oracle said to have been received from Hachiman in the reign of the fifty-first sovereign, Emperor Heizei (r. 806–809). In it Hachiman vowed to protect the nation until the reign of the hundredth sovereign.

12. The Retired Emperor of Oki refers to Emperor Gotoba, the Retired Emperor of Awa, to Emperor Tsuchimikado, the Retired Emperor of Sado, to Emperor Juntoku, and the emperor of Higashi Ichijo, to Emperor Chukyo. In a number of his writ-

ings, the Daishonin attributes both the defeat of the Heike clan and the failure of the Retired Emperor Gotoba and his associates in attempting to overthrow the Kamakura regime to their reliance on the rituals of the True Word school.

13. This statement is found in *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom.*