

Reply to the Lay Nun Myoho



I HAVE received your gift of a light summer robe.

You have been left behind by your deceased husband in a woman's situation, and are separated from your relatives, too. You hear nothing from your one or two daughters, who are not to be relied on. Moreover, you are a woman who is hated by others because of this teaching. You are just like Bodhisattva Never Disparaging.

The Buddha's aunt, the nun Mahaprajapati, was a woman. Nevertheless, she became an arhat, gained a name as a voice-hearer, and entered a path by which Buddhahood can never be attained. Changing her appearance as a woman, she abandoned her status as royal consort and began to honor the exhortations of the Buddha. For more than forty years, she upheld the five hundred precepts. By day she stood by the roadside [begging for alms], and by night she sat beneath a tree praying for her next life. And yet she was denied the path that leads to Buddhahood and was spoken of widely as one who was forever incapable of becoming a Buddha. How mortifying these things must have been! Because she was a woman, from inconceivably distant kalpas in the past people had spread false rumors about her, mixing fact and fiction. How embarrassing and vexing it must have been! When, loathing that body, she

dressed herself humbly and became a nun, she thought that she could free herself from such sorrows. Upon learning that, on the contrary, having become a person of the two vehicles, she was never to attain Buddhahood, how wretched she must have felt! By means of the Lotus Sutra, however, she was absolved from the wrath of the Buddhas of the three existences and was able to become a Buddha called Gladly Seen by All Living Beings. How happy, how joyful she must have been!

Thus, if it is for the sake of the Lotus Sutra, no matter what may occur, one should never turn one's back. The Buddha "in a loud voice addressed all the four kinds of believers, saying, 'Who is capable of broadly preaching the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law in this saha world?'"¹ When they responded with the thought, "I am, I am!" the Buddha admonished the nuns and laywomen as many as three times, saying that, if they desired to repay their debt to all the Buddhas, they should persevere through any difficulty to spread the Lotus Sutra in this saha world after his passing. But their failing to take his advice and saying that they wanted "to go to lands in other regions and broadly propagate this sutra"² shows that these were nuns who totally misunderstood the truth. How exasperated the Buddha must have been!

That is why the Buddha turned aside and looked earnestly at the eight hundred thousand million nayutas of bodhisattvas.

I had therefore thought that, though women would tarnish their names and throw away their lives on meaningless paths, they were weak at following the path to Buddhahood. But now you, born a woman in the evil world of the latter age, while being reviled, struck, and persecuted by the barbaric inhabitants of this island country who are unaware of these things, have endured and are propagating the Lotus Sutra. The Buddha at Eagle Peak surely perceives that you surpass the nun [Mahaprajapati] as greatly as clouds do mud. The name of that nun, the Buddha Gladly Seen by All Living Beings, is no unrelated matter; it is now the name of the lay nun Myoho. One who becomes a king is reputed to be a person who in both the past and the present has observed the ten good precepts. Although the names of the kings may change, there is only one lion throne.

This name likewise will never change.

Even that nun who went against the Buddha's words received the name Buddha Gladly Seen by All Living Beings. You are a lay nun who, being true to the Buddha's words, has lost her good name only in this saha world and is giving her life [for the Lotus Sutra]. The Buddha did not abandon the nun, his foster mother. If he were to abandon you as one who is unrelated to him, he would be a biased Buddha. But how could such a thing ever be? And how much less so if, as the sutra states, "The living beings in it [the threefold world] are all my children"?³ Then you are the Buddha's daughter, and that nun was his foster mother. Is it possible that the Buddha, who did not abandon his foster mother, would wish to abandon his own daughter? Please understand the truth of this thoroughly. I have gone on too long, so I will stop here.

Nichiren

To the lay nun Myoho



Background

This letter was written at Minobu to a woman called the lay nun Myoho. There seem to have been several women among the Daishonin's followers known as Myoho; this particular Myoho was a widow who lived at Okamiya in Suruga Province. She also received the letter *The One Essential Phrase*. Her husband had died in 1278, and from the present letter, thought to have been written in 1281, it is clear that she was now virtually alone in the world. Whether because her daughters had married and become part of their husbands' families, or for some other reason, they were apparently of little help to her. She also lived apart from her

other relatives, possibly an estrangement stemming from her belief in the Daishonin's teaching. In any event, she appears to have maintained pure and steadfast faith despite the opposition of those around her.

In this letter, thanking her for the gift of a summer robe, Nichiren Daishonin praises her strong resolve and likens her to Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, who patiently endured repeated insults in carrying out his Buddhist practice.

In the main part of the letter, the Daishonin likens the lay nun Myoho to the Buddha's maternal aunt Mahaprajapati, the first Buddhist nun. In the India of Shakyamuni's time, there

was no institution of women who had renounced lay life to pursue religious disciplines. Establishing the order of Buddhist nuns was thus a revolutionary step, and Mahaprajapati appears to have played a crucial role. The Miscellaneous Agama Sutra praises her as the foremost nun among the voice-hearer disciples. From the viewpoint of the provisional Mahayana teachings, however, the voice-hearers cannot become Buddhas. The Daishonin suggests that, in becoming a nun, Mahaprajapati perhaps hoped to free herself from the sufferings accompanying a woman's harshly restricted position in society. How distressed she must have been to learn that she had entered a path that would never lead her to Buddhahood! The

Lotus Sutra, however, repudiates the provisional teachings and declares that Buddhahood is open to all. Thus, in the Lotus Sutra, Mahaprajapati was able to receive Shakyamuni's prediction that she would one day become a Buddha.

Myoho's experience may have been similar to Mahaprajapati's, in that she too had no doubt undergone various sufferings because of her sex, and, after taking religious vows, met still further hardships on account of Buddhism. However, the Daishonin points out that, because she has taken faith in the Lotus Sutra, she is certain to attain Buddhahood. Therefore, Mahaprajapati's Buddha-name—"Gladly Seen by All Living Beings"—applies equally well to Myoho.

Notes

1. Lotus Sutra, chap. 11.
2. Ibid., chap. 13.

3. Ibid., chap. 3.