

The Kalpa of Decrease



THE kalpa of decrease¹ has its origin in the human heart. As the poisons of greed, anger, and foolishness gradually intensify, the life span of human beings gradually decreases and their stature diminishes.

Before the introduction of Buddhism in the lands of China and Japan, the non-Buddhist scriptures of the Three Sovereigns, the Five Emperors, and the Three Sages were used to bring order to the hearts of the people and govern the world. When the hearts of the people gradually diminished in good and grew adept at evil, it became impossible to restrain profoundly evil offenses because the wisdom of the non-Buddhist scriptures was shallow. Since the world was ungovernable with the non-Buddhist scriptures, the Buddhist scriptures were gradually introduced, and when they were used in governing, the world became tranquil. This was solely because the wisdom of Buddhism can fully elucidate the hearts of the people.

What are called “non-Buddhist writings” today differ in spirit from the original non-Buddhist scriptures. Although when Buddhism was introduced the non-Buddhist scriptures and the Buddhist scriptures vied with each other, in time the non-Buddhist scriptures were defeated, and the ruler and the people no longer made use of them. But as

adherents of the non-Buddhist scriptures became followers of the Buddhist scriptures, and confrontations came to an end, these adherents extracted the essence of the Buddhist scriptures, increased their wisdom, and incorporated it into the non-Buddhist scriptures. Foolish rulers thought that this was actually the wisdom of the non-Buddhist writings.

Moreover, when good wisdom gradually diminished and evil wisdom surpassed it in people’s hearts, the rulers tried to govern society with the wisdom of the Hinayana sutras, which are also included among the Buddhist scriptures, but the world was not at peace. At that time, when the rulers spread the Mahayana sutras and used them to govern, order was somewhat restored in the world. After that, when the wisdom of the Mahayana teachings was no longer adequate, the wisdom of the sutra of the one vehicle was introduced and used to govern the world, and for a brief while the world was at peace.

The present age is such that neither the non-Buddhist scriptures, the Hinayana sutras, the Mahayana sutras, nor the one vehicle of the Lotus Sutra has any effect. The reason is that the enormity of the greed, anger, and foolishness in people’s hearts is equal to the superiority of the World-Honored One of Great Enlightenment in great good. To

illustrate, in the keenness of its sense of smell, a dog is superior to a man. Moreover, in picking up the scent of birds and beasts, its nose is not inferior to a great sage's supernatural power of smell.² The owl's keenness of hearing, the kite's sharpness of eye, the sparrow's lightness of tongue, and the dragon's magnificence of body—all surpass even the faculties of a worthy. Thus, the extremity of greed, anger, and foolishness in people's hearts in the impure world of the latter age makes it difficult for any worthy or sage to control.

This is because, though the Buddha cured greed with the medicine of the meditation on the vileness of the body, healed anger with the meditation on compassion for all, and treated foolishness with the meditation on the twelve-linked chain of causation, teaching these doctrines now makes people worse and compounds their greed, anger, and foolishness. For example, fire is extinguished by water, and evil is defeated by good. In contrast, however, if water is poured on fire that has emerged from water, it would be as if one had poured oil, producing an even greater conflagration.

Now in this latter, evil age, great evil arises less from secular wrongdoing than in connection with the doctrines of the religious world. When people today, who are unaware of this, endeavor to cultivate roots of good, events that lead to the ruin of the world occur all the more. Although superficially it may seem to be an act of good to provide support to the priests of the Tendai, True Word, and other schools of the present age, in reality it is a great evil surpassing even the five cardinal sins and the ten evil acts.

For this reason, in order that peace reign in the age, if a wise man existed in the world with wisdom like that of the World-Honored One of Great Enlightenment, and if he met with a worthy ruler like King Sen'yo;³ and if

together they devoted themselves to putting an end to these acts of good and committed the great evil of censuring, banishing, cutting off alms to, or even beheading those persons of the eight schools who are thought to be men of wisdom, then the age may be pacified to some extent.

This is explained in the first volume of the Lotus Sutra where it says, "The true aspect of all phenomena can only be understood and shared between Buddhas." In the phrase "consistency from beginning to end,"⁴ "beginning" indicates the root of evil and the root of good, and "end" indicates the outcome of evil and the outcome of good. One who is thoroughly awakened to the nature of good and evil from their roots to their branches and leaves is called a Buddha. T'ien-t'ai stated, "Life at each moment is endowed with the Ten Worlds."⁵ Chang-an stated, "The Buddha intended these as his ultimate teachings. How could they ever be easy to understand?"⁶ Miao-lo added that "this principle is the ultimate revelation of his [T'ien-t'ai's] final and supreme teaching."⁷ The Lotus Sutra states, "[The doctrines that they preach . . .] will never be contrary to the true reality."⁸ T'ien-t'ai commented on this, saying that "no worldly affairs of life or work are ever contrary to the true reality."⁹ A person of wisdom is not one who practices Buddhism apart from worldly affairs but, rather, one who thoroughly understands the principles by which the world is governed.

When the Yin dynasty became corrupt and the people were suffering, T'ai-kung Wang¹⁰ appeared in the world and beheaded King Chou of the Yin, bringing an end to the people's misery. When the Second Emperor of the Ch'in dynasty¹¹ caused the people to taste bitterness, Chang Liang appeared and restored order to the world, enabling them to know sweetness. Though these men lived before the in-

roduction of Buddhism, they helped the people as emissaries of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings. And though the adherents of the non-Buddhist scriptures were unaware of it, the wisdom of such men contained at heart the wisdom of Buddhism.

If there were a ruler of outstanding wisdom in the world today, at the time of the great earthquake of the Shoka era, or at the time of the great comet of the Bun'ei era,¹² he would surely have heeded me, Nichiren. Or even if that had not happened, when strife broke out within the ruling clan in the ninth year of Bun'ei (1272), or when the Mongols attacked in the eleventh year of the same era, he would have welcomed me as King Wen of the Chou dynasty welcomed T'ai-kung Wang, or sought me out as King Kao-ting¹³ of the Yin dynasty sought out Fu Yüeh from seven *ri* away. Thus it is said that the sun and moon are not treasures to one who is sightless, and that a worthy man will be hated by a foolish ruler. Rather than go on at length, I will stop here. The heart of the Lotus Sutra is just as I have explained. You should not think of it as otherwise. Great evil portends the arrival of great good. If all of Jambudvipa were to be thrown into

chaos, there could be no doubt that [this sutra would] "be widely propagated throughout Jambudvipa."¹⁴

I have decided to send Acharya Daishin to pay a visit to the grave of the late lay priest Rokuro.¹⁵ In the past, I had thought that, if there were people in the Kanto region who had heard this teaching, I would go to their graves myself and recite the verse section of the "Life Span" chapter of the Lotus Sutra. If I were to go there under the present circumstances, however, the entire province would hear of it within the day, and it would probably cause an uproar as far away as Kamakura. Even though they have steadfast faith, wherever I go, people must fear the eyes of others.

When I thought how much the late lay priest Rokuro might be longing to see me since I had not yet visited, it seemed to me that there was probably something I could do. Thus, to begin with, I have decided to send a disciple to recite the verse section of the "Life Span" chapter before his grave. I ask for your understanding on that point.

With my deep respect.



Background

Neither the date nor addressee of this letter is known. Judging from the concluding paragraph, Nichiren Daishonin may have sent it via his disciple Acharya Daishin to someone in the clan of the late lay priest Takahashi Rokuro Hyoe, a believer who lived in Kajima in Fuji District of Suruga Province.

In the opening statement the Daishonin says, "The kalpa of decrease has its origin in the human heart." He then explains that the world declines

as a result of human delusion, and that, as the greed, anger, and foolishness of people's hearts intensify, progressively higher teachings are needed to check that influence. In the present time, the Latter Day of the Law, those three poisons are so pervasive that the provisional teachings not only fail to restrain them, but aggravate them all the more. In this age, the Daishonin explains, the worst evils actually arise, not from secular misdeeds, but from attachment to

the doctrines of the various schools of Buddhism, whose practice no longer leads one to salvation.

Citing the passage from the "Expedient Means" chapter of the Lotus Sutra "The true aspect of all phenomena can only be understood and shared between Buddhas," the Daishonin explains that only the Buddhas' wisdom is capable of discerning the supreme truth that will bring about peace in the world. He also explains that a person of true wisdom is not one who carries out the Buddhist practice in isolation from the world, but who thoroughly comprehends the principles by which the world may be governed. This is in keeping with the Lotus Sutra's teaching that the ultimate reality is manifest in all phenomena. In this sense, the wise ministers who helped bring peace to

their dynasties in China in the ages before the introduction of Buddhism may be said to have grasped a portion of the Buddhist Law.

Though the ruler of Japan did not heed the Daishonin's admonition that only faith in the Mystic Law could restore peace to the land, the Daishonin nevertheless was convinced that his teaching would one day flourish. As suggested by the title of this letter, the disasters besetting society in his time were viewed by the Daishonin from one perspective as stemming from human delusion and attachment to inferior teachings. However, as indicated by the statement "Great evil portends the arrival of great good," the Daishonin also interpreted them from another perspective as heralding the rise and spread of the supreme Law.

Notes

1. The kalpa of decrease is a period when the human life span diminishes. When the world is in the stage of continuance (see kalpa in Glossary), the life span of human beings is said to undergo a cycle of change, increasing one year every hundred years until it reaches eighty thousand, and then decreasing at the same rate.

2. This refers to the supernatural abilities possessed by the bodhisattvas of Hinayana Buddhism.

3. King Sen'yo was the ruler of a great kingdom in India before the time of Shakyamuni. He once had five hundred Brahmans put to death for slandering the Mahayana teachings. The Daishonin refers to him here to point out the importance of a strict attitude toward protecting the correct Law.

4. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2. This phrase concludes the passage describing "the true aspect of all phenomena." The full passage reads, "The true aspect of all phenomena can only be understood and shared between Buddhas. This reality consists of the appearance, nature, entity, power, influence, internal cause, relation, latent effect, manifest effect, and their consistency from beginning to end."

5. *Great Concentration and Insight*.

6. *The Annotations on "The Treatise on the Observation of the Mind."*

7. *The Annotations on "Great Concentration and Insight."*

8. Lotus Sutra, chap. 19.

9. *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*.

10. T'ai-kung Wang was teacher and adviser to Hsi Po, the Earl of the West (later known as King Wen of the Chou dynasty). His strategies are said to have enabled Hsi Po's son, King Wu, to overthrow the Yin dynasty and establish the Chou dynasty.

11. The Second Emperor of the Ch'in dynasty refers to Hu Hai (229-207 B.C.E.). A puppet ruler, he was controlled by the eunuch official Chao Kao, who eventually forced Hu Hai to commit suicide to further his own ambitions. Chang Liang (d. 168 B.C.E.), mentioned next, was a statesman and strategist who assisted Liu Pang in the overthrow of the Ch'in dynasty and the establishment of the Han dynasty.

12. References are to a major earthquake that leveled much of Kamakura in 1257 and to a large comet that appeared in 1264.

13. Kao-ting was the twenty-second rul-

er of the Yin dynasty. According to *Records of the Historian*, he sought to revive the declining Yin dynasty, but was unable to find capable advisers. At length he learned of Fu Yüeh, and though he had been living in retirement, Kao-ting appointed him his minister. Because of Fu Yüeh's counsel, Kao-ting was able to revive the dynasty.

14. The Daishonin alludes here to a passage from chapter 28 of the Lotus Sutra that states, "After the Thus Come One has entered extinction, I will cause it to be

widely propagated throughout Jambudvipa and will see that it never comes to an end."

15. Acharya Daishin was a priest-disciple of the Daishonin, who is thought to have been a relative of the Soya family. The lay priest Rokuro is thought to refer to the lay priest Takahashi Rokuro Hyoe, a disciple of the Daishonin who was a leading figure among the lay believers in the Fuji area. He was converted to the Daishonin's Buddhism by Nikko Shonin, who was his wife's nephew.