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The Gift of Rice

I HAVE received the sack of polished rice, the sack of yams, and the basket of river laver that you took the trouble to send me by messenger.

Human beings have two kinds of treasure. One is clothing and the other is food. A sutra states, "Sentient beings live in dependence on food."[1] This passage means that living beings dwell in this world owing to food and clothing. Fish dwell in water and regard water as their treasure. Trees grow on the earth and regard the earth as their treasure. Human beings have life owing to food, and regard food as their treasure.

Life is the foremost of all treasures. It is expounded that even the treasures of the entire major world system cannot equal the value of one's body and life.[2] Even the treasures that fill the major world system are no substitute for life. Life is like a lamp, and food is like oil. When the oil is exhausted, the lamp goes out, and without food, life will cease.

In worshiping all the deities and Buddhas, the word *namu* is put ahead of their names. To explain exactly what namu means, namu is a word from India. In China and Japan it is translated as "dedicating one's life." "Dedicating one's life" means to offer one's life to the Buddha. In accordance with their status, some have wives and children, relatives, fiefs, and gold and silver, while others have no treasure. Whether one has wealth or not, no treasure exceeds the one called life. This is why those known as the sages and worthies of ancient times offered their lives to the Buddha and then became Buddhas.

The boy Snow Mountains offered his body to a demon to receive a teaching composed of eight characters.[3] Bodhisattva Medicine King burned his arms as an offering to the Lotus Sutra. In our own country too, Prince Shotoku peeled off the skin of his hand and copied the Lotus Sutra on it, and the sovereign known as Emperor Tenji[4] burned his third finger as an offering to Shakyamuni Buddha. Because these things are the affairs of worthies and sages, they are impossible for us to do.

However, as for the matter of becoming a Buddha, ordinary people keep in mind the words "earnest resolve" and thereby become Buddhas. When we carefully consider what exactly earnest resolve refers to, it is the doctrine of observing the mind. When we inquire into what exactly the doctrine of observing the mind refers to, it means that offering one's only robe to the Lotus Sutra is equivalent to peeling off one's skin; and that in a time of famine, offering the food that is the only means for sustaining one's life that day to the Buddha is offering one's life to the Buddha.

The blessings from this are in no way inferior to those Bodhisattva Medicine King gained by burning his arms, or the boy Snow Mountains gained by offering his body to a demon. Thus, what is appropriate for sages is offering in actuality [offering one's life itself for the Law]. What is appropriate for ordinary people is offering in principle [sincerely offering what is important to one's own life]. This is the teaching called the paramita of almsgiving[5] for the observation of the mind that is set forth in the seventh volume of *Great Concentration and Insight.*

The true path lies in the affairs of this world. The Golden Light Sutra states, "To have a profound knowledge of this world is itself Buddhism." The Nirvana Sutra states, "All of the non-Buddhist scriptures and writings in society are themselves Buddhist teachings, not non-Buddhist teachings."

When the Great Teacher Miao-lo compared these passages with the one from the sixth volume of the Lotus Sutra that reads, "No worldly affairs of life or work are ever contrary to the true reality,"[6] he revealed their meaning and pointed out that although the first two sutras are profound, since their meaning is still shallow and fails to approach that of the Lotus Sutra, they relate secular matters in terms of Buddhism, whereas the Lotus Sutra explains that in the end secular matters are the entirety of Buddhism.

The essence of the sutras preached before the Lotus Sutra is that all phenomena arise from the mind. To illustrate, they say that the mind is like the great earth, while the grasses and trees are like all phenomena. But it is not so with the Lotus Sutra. It teaches that the mind itself is the great earth, and that the great earth itself is the grasses and trees. The meaning of the earlier sutras is that clarity of mind is like the moon, and that purity of mind is like a flower. But it is not so with the Lotus Sutra. It is the teaching that the moon itself is mind, and the flower itself is mind. You should realize from this that polished rice is not polished rice; it is life itself.

Background

This letter is missing the name of its addressee and the date of composition. The title, *The Gift of Rice,* derives from the opening passage of the letter, in which Nichiren Daishonin gives thanks for the offerings made. It also indicates the theme for this letter, which addresses the spirit of offering in Buddhism. While sages of old practiced "offering in actuality," giving their very lives for Buddhism, ordinary people in the present age practice "offering in principle," giving what sustains or is of value to their lives. Ultimately, the Daishonin says, "earnest resolve" is what makes offering, or almsgiving, in Buddhism a meaningful act. The Daishonin thus equates the polished rice he has received to life itself.

Life at Mount Minobu was harsh, and the Daishonin and his disciples were often in need of food and other provisions. Fortunately, he had a loyal group of lay supporters who helped provide him with necessities.

Notes

1. Source unknown.

2. A similar passage is cited in *The Commentary on the Brahma Net Sutra* as a quotation from *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom.*

3. The story of the boy Snow Mountains offering his body to a demon is found in the Nirvana Sutra. "A teaching composed of eight characters" refers to the last sentence of the following passage: "All is changeable, nothing is constant. This is the law of birth and death. Extinguishing the cycle of birth and death, one enters the joy of nirvana."

4. An account of Prince Shotoku (574–622) peeling off the skin of his hand is found in *A Personal Commentary on Matters concerning Prince Shotoku.* An account of Emperor Tenji (626–671), the thirty-eighth emperor, burning his third finger is found in *A Brief History of Japan.*

5. The paramita of almsgiving is one of the six paramitas, or practices, for Mahayana bodhisattvas.

6. This passage actually appears in T'ien-t'ai's *Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra* as an annotation to the following passage from the "Benefits of the Teacher of the Law" chapter of the Lotus Sutra: "The doctrines that they preach during that time will conform to the gist of the principles and will never be contrary to the true reality. If they should expound some text of the secular world or speak on matters of government or occupations that sustain life, they will in all cases conform to the correct Law."