Why Present-Day Nembutsu Practitioners Are Destined for the Hell of Incessant Suffering

Written by Āchārya Nichiren at Renge-ji temple in the hamlet of Hanabusa in Tōjō Village, Nagasa District, Awa Province, for Jōen-bō. The first year of Bun’ei [1264], cyclical sign kine-no, ninth month, twenty-second day.

QUESTION: What is your reason for asserting that present-day practitioners of the Nembutsu are destined to fall into the hell of incessant suffering?

Answer: I base my reasoning on The Nembutsu Chosen above All by Hōnen. Question: And what does this Nembutsu Chosen above All say?

Answer: During the Kennin era [1201–1204], when the Retired Emperor Gotoba exercised power, a comet appeared in the country of Japan, and its name was Hōnen, also known as Genkū. He wrote a work in one volume called Nembutsu Chosen above All, which runs to some sixty or more sheets of paper. It is divided by topic into sixteen sections, and in the first section he states that, according to The Collected Essays on the World of Peace and Delight by the Meditation Master Tao-ch’o, two categories of teachings are to be distinguished, the Sacred Way teachings and the Pure Land teachings. The Sacred Way teachings include all the Hinayana and Mahayana sutras with the exception of the three Pure Land sutras. The designation “Sacred Way teachings” includes the various exoteric and esoteric Mahayana sutras, such as the Mahāvairochana Sutra, the Lotus Sutra, the Benevolent Kings Sutra, and the Golden Light Sutra, works that have been held in particular reverence by the imperial court, and all schools of Buddhism that honor any Buddha or bodhisattva other than Amida Buddha, among these the True Word school and the others that make up the eight schools that have been held in particular reverence by the imperial court. It is asserted that although these various sutras, Buddhas, and schools were appropriate for the capacities of persons living in the Former and Middle Days of the Law, now that the world has entered the Latter Day of the Law, not a single person who puts faith in them can hope to gain release from the sufferings of birth and death.

Hōnen also notes that the Dharma Teacher T’an-luan in his Commentary on “The Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land” distinguishes two types of practice, a difficult-to-practice way and an easy-to-practice way.

In the second section of his work, Hōnen follows the writings of the
Reverend Shan-tao, five works in a total of nine volumes, in distinguishing two categories of practice, namely, correct practices and sundry practices. The so-called sundry practices correspond to the Sacred Way teachings described by Tao-ch’o. It is moreover asserted that, now that we have entered the Latter Day of the Law, not one person in a thousand who carries out such sundry practices can hope to attain rebirth in the Pure Land.

In the remaining fourteen sections of the work, Hōnen describes the Sacred Way teachings, the difficult-to-practice way, and the sundry practices as productive of only small good, as teachings designed to accord with the minds of others, and as resulting in only limited benefit or blessing, but he describes the Nembutsu and its associated practices as productive of great good, as a teaching that accords with the Buddha’s own mind, and as resulting in unsurpassed blessing. He therefore advises ordinary mortals in the Latter Day of the Law to discard these sundry practices, to close the door to them, to ignore and abandon them in favor of the Nembutsu, using these four words “discard, close, ignore, and abandon” in an effort to put an end to such practices.

At first ignorant and unwise people throughout Japan, both members of the clergy and lay believers, and then everyone, like grass bowing before a great wind, began to heed this advice of Hōnen, setting aside the joyful acceptance with which they had earlier embraced the Lotus Sutra or the True Word teachings and abandoning all thought of further establishing them.

Then each person, fashioning a square-headed rosary, set about chanting the name of Amida Buddha, some of them thirty thousand times a day, some sixty thousand times, some a hundred thousand times, some four hundred and eighty thousand times, some a million times. They engaged in no practice designed to produce roots of goodness in their lives other than constructing Nembutsu halls, until these stood as thick as rice or hemp plants, as bamboo or reeds.

In the end, even those believers of the Lotus Sutra or True Word teachings who were regarded as particularly knowledgeable, in order to gain converts or in order to be reborn in the Pure Land, all abandoned their original school and became Nembutsu practitioners, or, while continuing as members of their original school, paid reverence to the Nembutsu teachings.

Now I have this to say. Although the four kinds of believers in this country of Japan may differ from one another in form, their basic intent in all cases is to carry out this one single practice, the Nembutsu, hoping thereby to achieve rebirth in the western region. But, though ours may appear to be a land in which the Buddhist teaching flourishes greatly, serious doubts arise in this connection. These are occasioned by the fact that we see or hear reports that when the wise persons who are looked up to as the leaders of the Nembutsu school, and the greater and lesser feudal lords and other persons of outstanding worth who serve as the major lay supporters of the school, lie on their deathbeds, they do not in many cases find their expectations fulfilled.

The Reverend Shan-tao states categorically that out of ten persons who recite the Nembutsu, all ten will be reborn in the Pure Land, that whether they recite it ten times or throughout their lifetime, not one will fail to attain such rebirth or will be omitted from those who do so. But when we compare the actual death of these persons with the assertions of Shan-tao, we find them to be as different from one another as fire is from water.

The Nembutsu practitioners explain
the matter in this fashion. They say that there are four types of rebirth in the Pure Land. First is rebirth through fixing one's thought on the Buddha Amida. The authority they cite for this is the Sutra of the Meditation to Behold the Buddhas.

Second is rebirth through right mindfulness of the Buddha Amida. For this they cite the Amida Sutra.

Third is rebirth through the morally neutral state of mind, explained in The Treatise Resolving Numerous Doubts.

Fourth is rebirth through a crazed and disordered state of mind, which they say is described in the Meditation Sutra, in a part pertaining to persons of the lowest of the nine grades of rebirth in the Pure Land.

I would state my criticisms of this as follows. I will not for the moment comment on the first two categories, rebirth through thought on the Buddha and rebirth through right mindfulness of the Buddha. But I would ask what sutra or treatise the Meditation Master Huai-kan was relying on when he described the category of rebirth through the morally neutral state of mind. If he has no authority in the sutras or treatises for his assertions, then I would say that they are very difficult to accept.

With regard to the fourth category, rebirth through a crazed and disordered state of mind, the Nembutsu practitioners cite as their authority the passage in the Meditation Sutra that refers to persons of the lowest of the nine grades of rebirth in the Pure Land.

This passage says that when an evil person is on his deathbed, though he may encounter a good friend and counselor who understands the wonderful teaching and will explain for the person his own understanding of the true aspect of all phenomena, that person lacks the kind of right mindfulness that would allow him to comprehend what his friend is saying. He is pressed and tormented by the ill effects of the ten evil acts, the five cardinal sins, and the other bad actions he has performed and cannot understand the teaching. The good friend then says that, as a first step toward an understanding of the true aspect of all phenomena, the person should concentrate on Amida Buddha by invoking the Buddha's name. The dying person thereupon raises his voice and completes [ten recitations of] the Buddha's name.

But what is described here is the case of a person who, troubled by pains that are difficult to bear, loses his condition of right mindfulness. It does not refer to a person who is completely crazed and disordered in mind. If the person were actually crazed and disordered in mind, how could he carry out the ten recitations of the Nembutsu? If one were to classify the case, it should be placed in the category of rebirth through right mindfulness of the Buddha. It cannot be classified as an example of rebirth through a crazed and disordered state of mind.

The Reverend Shan-tao, whom you and the others of your school look up to as your original teacher, when speaking of this passage, says that the good friend "changes the teaching and urges vocal recitation of the name of Amida Buddha." He does not describe it as an example of "rebirth through a crazed and disordered state of mind."

Moreover, you and others through all the hours of day and night repeatedly utter a prayer that reads: "When our disciples face their final hour, may they not find their minds in a topsy-turvy condition, may they not find their minds confused and disordered, may they not lose their minds, may they be free of all pain and suffering in body and mind, may they enjoy ease and comfort in body and mind as though they have entered a state of calm meditation." The term "confused and disordered" in this prayer must be the
same in meaning as the term "crazed and disordered," must it not?

Furthermore, I do not understand the reason why present-day exalted leaders of the Nembutsu teachings and their eminent lay supporters, persons who have surely not committed the ten evil acts or the five cardinal sins, when they are on the brink of death, should be afflicted by grave illnesses such as outbreaks of evil sores, or when on their deathbed should fall into a crazed and disordered state of mind.

The Reverend Shan-tao has stated categorically that of ten believers in the Nembutsu, ten will surely attain rebirth, that they are certain to gain rebirth in the Pure Land. There should be no doubt about the matter. Therefore if, of ten such persons, nine attain rebirth but one fails to do so, we are entitled to question the truth of his assertion. And how much more so when we hear reports and learn that such outstanding leaders of the Nembutsu school as Zenze, Ryūkan, Shōkō, Sashō, Namu, and Shinkō all succumbed to severe illnesses such as outbreaks of evil sores and in their final hour died in a state in which their minds were crazed and disordered!

And among the Nembutsu practitioners of less importance, there are untold numbers who on their deathbeds sink into a crazed and disordered state of mind. This not only falls short of the Reverend Shan-tao's confident prediction of ten persons out of ten attaining rebirth, but in fact comes nearer to his statement that "not even one person in a thousand" can be saved. It was the practitioners of the Lotus Sutra and True Word teachings of whom he predicted that not one person in a thousand would be saved. And yet we receive reports that such practitioners in most cases confront death in a state of right mindfulness.

According to the Nembutsu teaching, of the three periods of time, the Former Day of the Law, the Middle Day of the Law, and the Latter Day of the Law, it is the Latter Day of the Law when this doctrine will be particularly widespread. There will be persons of keen capacity and those of dull capacity, good persons and evil persons, keepers of the precepts and violators of the precepts. Among these, it is the persons of dull capacity, evil persons, and violators of the precepts particularly who will be able to attain rebirth in the Pure Land.

Therefore the Meditation Master Tao-ch’o writes, "Only this single doctrine of the Pure Land [offers a road by which one can gain admittance]." The Reverend Shan-tao assures us that "ten persons out of ten will be reborn in the Pure Land." And in The Essentials of Rebirth in the Pure Land we are told that this doctrine constitutes "the eyes and feet for those who live in this defiled latter age of ours."

But if the Nembutsu doctrine is supposedly particularly appropriate to the age we live in and the capacities of the people in it, and thus no one who practices it should fail to achieve success, the discrepancies I have mentioned above lead me to have grave doubts. And if as a result I find myself having doubts about the original vows of Amida Buddha, then I cannot help doubting the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha [who preached Amida's vows]. Indeed, I find myself in a position where I can go neither forward nor backward.

I have questioned the leaders of the Nembutsu school regarding this matter, as well as the leaders of the schools that advocate the Sacred Way teachings, but not a single one of them has been able to give me an answer.

Practitioners of the Nembutsu attempt to protect their school by saying: You criticize the Honorable Honen's four injunctions to "discard, close, ignore, and abandon" the other
teachings as a kind of slander against the Law. But you do so because, in your limited wisdom, you fail to understand them correctly. Do you suppose that the Honorable Hōnen simply set forth these four injunctions on his own authority alone? The fact is that he derived them originally from the commentaries written by three earlier teachers of doctrine, T’an-luan, Tao-ch’o, and Shan-tao. And the commentaries of these three teachers are not mere arbitrary inventions. They derive originally from and are based on the three Pure Land sutras and The Commentary on the Ten Stages Sutra by Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna.

In the first volume of the Two-Volumed Sutra, Amida Buddha states his eighteenth vow: “After I have attained Buddhahood... if they meditate on me ten times [and yet are not reborn there, may I not attain correct enlightenment].”

And the nineteenth vow reads: “After I have attained Buddhahood, if any among the living beings in the ten directions resolves to seek awakening, carries out various meritorious practices [and single-mindedly aspires to be reborn in my land, and if, when they approach the moment of their death, I do not appear before them, surrounded by a great assembly, may I not attain correct enlightenment].”

In the second volume of the same sutra it is stated: “[If any living beings hear his name and rejoice and arouse faith], single-mindedly dedicating their thoughts [with the resolution to be reborn in his land, they will immediately gain rebirth there and dwell in the stage of non-regression].” This refers to the fulfillment of the eighteenth vow.

Likewise in the second volume we read: “Those of the superior type are those who... exclusively bring to mind the Buddha Infinite Life.” “Those of the intermediate type are those who... exclusively bring to mind the Buddha Infinite Life.”

“Those of the inferior type are those who... exclusively bring to mind the Buddha Infinite Life.”

This refers to the fulfillment of the nineteenth vow.

The Meditation on the Buddha Infinite Life Sutra states: “The Buddha said to Ānanda, ‘You must hold fast to these words. Holding fast to these words means holding fast to the name of the Buddha Infinite Life.’”

And the Amida Sutra says: “One cannot be reborn in that Buddha land if one depends on the merit of the roots of little good. [Śāriputra, if good men or good women hear this explanation of the qualities of the Buddha Amida, and embrace his name, and keep it in mind single-mindedly and without distraction, be it] for one day, [for two, for three, for four, for five, for six], or for seven days, [then, when their lives come to an end, the Buddha Amida, together with his holy entourage, will appear before them].”

First, as to the passages cited from the Two-Volumed Sutra, they mean that though two types of rebirth are described, rebirth through the Nembutsu and rebirth through various other practices, the text says that one is to “exclusively bring to mind the Buddha Infinite Life,” which means that rebirth through other practices is hereby discarded. Therefore in the entrustment section of the sutra, when the Buddha entrusts the sutra to Maitreya, he is entrusting to him only the practice of the Nembutsu.

The Meditation on the Buddha Infinite Life Sutra describes sixteen types of meditation that lead to rebirth in the Pure Land. Of these, the first fifteen involve various practices other than the Nembutsu, while the sixteenth, that appropriate for those in the three lowest of the nine grades of rebirth in the Pure Land, refers to
rebirth through the Nembutsu. Thus, when the Buddha entrusts the Nembutsu to the Venerable Ananda, he means that the other practices are to be discarded.

In the Amida Sutra, the various other practices referred to in the Two-Volumed Sutra and the first fifteen types of meditation described in the Meditation on the Buddha Infinite Life Sutra are all lumped together and referred to as roots of little good, and it is stated as a matter of doctrine that one cannot attain rebirth in the Pure Land through such means.

In the Two-Volumed Sutra the Nembutsu is called a practice of unsurpassed blessing and is entrusted to Maitreya. In the Meditation Sutra the Nembutsu is termed a pundarika flower and is entrusted to Ananda. And in the Amida Sutra the Nembutsu is called a root of great good and is entrusted to Shariputra. The entreatment passages with which these sutras conclude are entrusting the heart and core of the entire sutra, and they are entrusting the name of the sutra [which is the name of Amida, or the Buddha Infinite Life]. In the three Pure Land sutras it is stated that, although there are various roots of goodness, among them the Nembutsu ranks highest. Therefore these sutras are titled the Buddha Infinite Life Sutra, the Meditation on the Buddha Infinite Life Sutra, and the Amida Sutra.

Judging from The Commentary on the Mahayana Treatise and The Treatise on the Lotus Sutra, all the sutras invariably begin with the two characters for namu. And if we examine the Sanskrit texts, we see that the titles of the three Pure Land sutras contain the word namu.

In the passage [on the nineteenth vow] quoted earlier from the Two-Volumed Sutra, the phrase “carries out various meritorious practices” is meant to include all the eighty thousand sacred teachings of the Buddha other than the Nembutsu. And in the Meditation on the Buddha Infinite Life Sutra, in the passage that deals with the three types of meritorious acts and the nine grades of rebirth in the Pure Land, when it says that one should “read and recite the great vehicle,” this is meant to include all the sutras without exception. And when the Amida Sutra speaks of the Nembutsu as a root of great good and contrasts it with the other types of practice, which constitute roots of little good, surely the Lotus Sutra must be included among the roots of little good.

What these three Pure Land sutras as a whole are saying is that, although the Buddha, in order to go along with the desires of the practitioners, for a while described various other types of practices, when it came time to describe the Nembutsu, he clearly meant for them to close the gate to the teachings regarding these other practices, meant, that is, that they should “discard, close, ignore, and abandon” them. It is comparable to the situation when the Buddha, because he was preparing to preach the Lotus Sutra, stated in the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra that his listeners were to discard the sutras that he had preached in the preceding forty and more years and instead turn to the teachings of the Lotus Sutra.

When Bodhisattva Nagarjuna wrote his Commentary on the Ten Stages Sutra, he classified all the sacred teachings of the Buddha’s lifetime into two categories, the difficult-to-practice way and the easy-to-practice way. The difficult-to-practice way refers to all the practices other than those advocated in the three Pure Land sutras. The easy-to-practice way refers to the Nembutsu.

Although these sutras and treatises state the matter very clearly, none of the Buddhist teachers of China understood their meaning. Only one such teacher, Shan-tao, was able to make out
the meaning. Therefore, when writing in his *Teaching on Meditation* on the three types of people, superior, intermediate, and inferior, referred to in the Two-Volumed Sutra, he says, “Living beings are none of them exactly alike in capacity and nature. Some are superior, some middling, some inferior. The Buddha urges them all to follow their particular capacity and nature and exclusively bring to mind the name of the Buddha Infinite Life.”

What he means by this passage is that the various other practices, indicated by the words “resolve to seek awakening and carry out various meritorious practices,” are ones that practitioners carry out before they encounter the Nembutsu, which relies on the power of another, upon Amida’s original vow. Therefore, what the Buddha had earlier told people to practice he now suddenly tells them to abandon. But though he does so, the practitioners do not necessarily heed him, and so he allows them to continue carrying out the other practices for a while. However, Shan-tao points out, in fact, no one can possibly achieve rebirth in the Pure Land by setting aside the Nembutsu and following such other practices.

Regarding the passage from the Meditation on the Buddha Infinite Life Sutra quoted above in which the Buddha addresses Ananda, Shan-tao, in the fourth volume of his commentary on the sutra, explains it as follows: “Earlier Shakayamuni Buddha expounded two kinds of practices, meditative good acts and unconcentrated good acts. Nevertheless, if we examine this in light of Amida Buddha’s original vows, we can see that Shakayamuni Buddha wishes living beings to devote themselves exclusively to the practice of calling on the name of Amida.”¹⁵

Meditative good acts and unconcentrated good acts cover all the practices expounded in all the eighty thousand teachings comprising the provisional and true sutras, and the exoteric and esoteric sutras, and the Buddha is saying that all of these except the Nembutsu are to be discarded.

In his *Hymns for Services*, when Shan-tao refers to the roots of little good and root of great good described in the Amida Sutra, he says: “The Land of Perfect Bliss is an unconditioned realm of nirvana. Therefore it is most likely difficult to achieve rebirth there by following the ordinary good practices that accord with changing circumstances. For this reason, the Thus Come One has selected one essential practice to teach to living beings, instructing them to concentrate their thoughts exclusively on Amida alone.”

Among all the various teachers, Shan-tao alone has perceived the true meaning of the three Pure Land sutras. But although this was the Thus Come One’s true intent when he set forth the three Pure Land sutras, because people in the Former and Middle Days of the Law were keen in their roots and capacities, some attained rebirth through various other practices.

But now the roots and capacities of living beings have suffered a decline and we have entered the period of the Latter Day of the Law. Thus these other methods of practice have gradually lost their effectiveness, and only the Nembutsu is now appropriate. Furthermore, the Thus Come One Amida has been reborn in China as the Reverend Shan-tao and has explained all of this clearly.

The Reverend Hōnen, having been born in Japan, at first entered the temple on Mount Hiei and carried out training and practice there. Later, he left Mount Hiei and devoted himself exclusively to the Nembutsu, thereby making clear for us the true meaning of the three Pure Land sutras.

You criticize the use of these four words “discard, close, ignore, and aban-
don,” claiming that they represent a
slandering of the Law. You do so, I
suppose, because you are not yet fami-
lar with the commentaries of the Re-
verend Shan-tao or the texts of the three
Pure Land sutras. You are like a dog
that tries to bite at a clap of thunder,
and are only creating for yourself more
karma that will destine you for rebirth
in hell. If there are matters here that
you do not understand, you should
consult the wise persons of the Pure
Land school.

In response to these remarks of the
Nembutsu believers, I would have to
express my doubts by asking whether
they really think that the arguments
they have put forth are sufficient to
excuse Hōnen from charges of slander-
ing the Law when he advises others to
“discard, close, ignore, and abandon”
all other teachings.

The three Chinese Pure Land teach-
ers,16 as well as Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna,
say that in the text of the three Pure
Land sutras the Buddha states that, in
comparison to the Nembutsu, the so-
called other practices are to be regard-
ed as secondary, and the texts of these
sutras bear out their contention. And if
such practices are condemned by the
sutra texts themselves, then the Nem-
butsu believers could hardly be blamed
for condemning them as well.

But doubts arise when we ask just
what is meant by these other practices.
The Two-Volumed Sutra speaks of
practices other than the Nembutsu, the
Meditation on the Buddha Infinite Life
Sutra speaks of the meditative good
acts and unconcentrated good acts oth-
er than the Nembutsu, and the Amida
Sutra speaks of practices other than
the Nembutsu that represent roots of
little good. If the Buddha had made it
clear that the outstanding Mahayana
sutras such as the Lotus, Nirvana,
and Mahāvairochana sutras were to be
included among such practices, and
that, in comparison to the Nembutsu,
they are to be condemned as roots of
goodness that can never lead one to
rebirth, then Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna,
the three Chinese Pure Land teachers,
and Hōnen would be committing no
error by condemning them as well.
But there is no indication that, when
the three Pure Land sutras speak of
practices that represent roots of little
good or use similar terms, these terms
are meant to include works such as
the Lotus, Nirvana, or Mahāvairochana
sutras. Therefore it is impossible to go
along with this interpretation put for-
ward by the three Pure Land teachers
and Hōnen.

As we know from the Immeasur-
able Meanings Sutra, the Buddha stated
that “in these more than forty years, I
have not yet revealed the truth.” Set-
ting aside the Lotus Sutra, which was
preached after this announcement, in
the last eight years of the Buddha’s life,
we cannot suppose that a single word
or phrase of the sutras preached in the
preceding forty-two years of the Bud-
дра’s preaching life, whether Mahayana
or Hinayana, provisional or true, can
escape being included in this category
in which the Buddha has “not yet
revealed the truth.”

Moreover, the Buddha then goes on
to mention by name the Āgama, Cor-
rect and Equal, Wisdom, and Flower
Garland sutras that he preached in
these preceding forty-two years. With
regard to these Mahayana and Hina-
yana sutras already preached, the term
“Āgama,” used in the Immeasurable
Meanings Sutra, refers to the Hina-
yana sutras in which he expounded
the impermanence of all things subject
to birth and extinction. The words
“Flower Garland teaching of the
ocean-imprint meditation” refer to the
Mahayana sutras in which he expound-
ed the doctrine that there is no es-
ential difference between the three
entities [the mind, the Buddha, and
living beings]. The phrase “teaching of
great wisdom” refers to the Mahayana sutras in which he expounded the eighteen kinds of non-substantiality. The term “correct and equal” refers to the Mahayana sutras in which he condemned those who follow the two vehicles.

Thus the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra designates a specific period of time during which they were preached and mentions these sutras by name, indicating that, in contrast to the Lotus Sutra, these various types of sutras are to be condemned. Therefore the Great Teacher Tʻien-tʻai was not simply expressing his own private opinion when he asserted that the schools that base their teachings on such sutras are likewise to be condemned.

It is quite true that these three Pure Land sutras that you speak of say that, in comparison to the Nembutsu, the other practices are to be condemned. But nowhere do they state that these practices include everything described in the sutras expounded during the entire fifty years of the Buddha’s preaching life other than the three Pure Land sutras. There is no passage comparable to the one in the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra that mentions the Āgama, Correct and Equal, Wisdom, and Flower Garland sutras by name. Who understands that in the three Pure Land sutras, when the Buddha speaks of practices that produce only roots of little good, he is referring simply to those described in the Hinayana sutras or the sutras that state that the attainment of enlightenment requires numerous kalpas of practice? To state arbitrarily, without any proof in the matter, that these practices other than the Nembutsu that represent only roots of little good must include all the practices described by the Buddha in the Lotus and Nirvana sutras and all the other teachings of his lifetime, and that therefore one should “discard, close, ignore, and abandon” them—this, I cannot help thinking, is to go directly counter to the will of the Buddha!

If, for example, we speak of the followers of the ruler, then this includes every person and every region within the entire nation, not excepting the lowliest individual. But if we speak of the followers of an ordinary commoner, this surely does not include the lords of the realm or the various outlying regions.

If in fact the three Pure Land sutras surpassed all the other sutras set forth in the entire fifty years of the Buddha’s preaching life, then we might say that all these other sutras were to be condemned. But there is nothing in the texts of these three Pure Land sutras to indicate that they surpass all the other sutras of the Buddha’s lifetime. They are rather small affairs, preached to fit one particular type of personal capacity and one particular set of circumstances. How could they be used to condemn all the other teachings of the Buddha’s lifetime?

But because the three Chinese Pure Land teachers and Hōnen failed to understand this, they supposed that the Lotus and Nirvana sutras and all the other teachings of the Buddha’s lifetime were to be included among the practices condemned by the Pure Land sutras, and they then went on to declare that not one person in a thousand who carries out such practices in this latter age can hope to be saved. This is to mistake the true meaning of the Pure Land sutras themselves and to go counter to the will of the Buddha.

In addition, you say that the difficult-to-practice way mentioned in Nāgārjuna’s Commentary on the Ten Stages Sutra includes the teachings set forth in the Lotus Sutra and the True Word sutras. Is this clearly stated in the text of the commentary? Even if it should be stated in the text of the commentary, unless there are reliable sutra passages to support this view, one
should regard it as highly questionable.

Perhaps the commentary was written when Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna was still an expounder of the provisional Mahayana teachings. Or one should consider the possibility that the passage in question was introduced into the text by the person who translated the commentary into Chinese. I say this because the bright mirror of the Buddha's own golden words in the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra clearly indicates that the teachings set forth in the preceding forty and more years of his preaching life represent the difficult-to-practice way, while those presented in the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra [and thereafter] represent the easy-to-practice way.

Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna made his appearance in the world just as the Buddha had predicted and expounded the meaning of the various sūtras. What reason would he have for going against the definition of the difficult-to-practice and easy-to-practice ways set forth by the Buddha himself, and expounding some other definition of his own?

In fact, if one reads the entire text of Commentary on the Ten Stages Sutra from beginning to end, one will see that there is no passage whatsoever that indicates that the Lotus Sutra is to be included in the difficult-to-practice category. The commentary merely deals with the first two of the ten stages of development described in the Flower Garland Sutra and ends its discussion there. As one can see, the commentary is concerned with the fact that various sūtras contend that the attainment of enlightenment requires numerous kalpas of practice, and therefore bodhisattvas may fall into this difficult-to-practice way or the way of persons of the two vehicles and thus never succeed in gaining Buddhahood. From this it is perfectly clear that the commentary deals with the period before the exposition of the Lotus Sutra.

The Pure Land teachers, failing to understand Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna's meaning, somehow surmised that the difficult-to-practice way referred to in the commentary was meant to include the Lotus and True Word teachings. The three Chinese Pure Land teachers, as we can see from their commentaries, on the whole supposed that the Lotus Sutra was to be included in the categories known as the difficult-to-practice way, sundry practices, or Sacred Way teachings. But they did not, like Hōnen, make wild pronouncements [about the need to ignore and abandon such teachings].

Furthermore, those who hope to spread the teachings of the Buddha must take into consideration certain factors, namely, the teaching to be spread, the capacity of the people, the time, the country, and the sequence in which the teachings are propagated.

When the Thus Come One was in the world, although he expounded various Mahayana and Hinayana doctrines during the first forty and more years of his preaching life, he did not reveal his true intentions, because the time to do so had not yet arrived. Even had the people possessed the capacity to receive it, it was not the proper time, and therefore he did not expound the great Law.

But during the eight-year period at Eagle Peak [when the Lotus Sutra was expounded], although the capacity of the people was not yet perfect, the time to do so had come, and so he revealed his true intentions, and in doing so, he changed the people's capacity from a capacity to receive the provisional teachings to a capacity to receive the true teaching.

It is clear from the transmission section of the Lotus Sutra and from the Nirvana Sutra that the true teaching should be regarded as primary and
the provisional teachings as incidental. Therefore we are perfectly justified in concluding that, although when the Buddha was in the world he initially concealed the true teaching and began by revealing the provisional teachings first, in the period following his demise, the true teaching should come first and the provisional teachings play only an incidental role.

However, in India during the thousand years of the Former Day of the Law, there were believers in non-Buddhist teachings, as well as some states that were exclusively Hinayana in their beliefs, some that were exclusively Mahayana, and some that embraced both Mahayana and Hinayana. And when the Buddhist doctrines were transmitted to China, a situation prevailed that was similar to that in India.

In the case of Japan, there was no one who believed in non-Buddhist teachings, and no one whose capacity fitted him to receive the Hinayana teachings, only people whose capacity fitted them for Mahayana. And these people were not fitted by capacity to receive any Mahayana teachings other than the Lotus Sutra.

To be sure, when the teachings of the Buddha were first introduced to Japan, three schools of Hinayana teachings and three schools of provisional Mahayana teachings were propagated for a time. But in the reign of Emperor Kammu, when the Great Teacher Dengyō was active, the teachings of these six schools were shown to be unsuitable and all their followers discarded their attachment and turned to the Tendai school.

The scholars of the three Hinayana schools, the Dharma Analysis Treasury school, the Establishment of Truth school, and the Precepts school, no longer thought, as the doctrines of these schools taught, that one should pass through the seven stages of worthiness and the three ways, cut off the illusions of thought and desire, and thereby achieve the goals of the two vehicle teachings. They simply practiced these Hinayana school teachings as a kind of introduction to the Mahayana doctrines and never believed that through them they could achieve the highest goal.

Likewise, those who practiced the teachings of the three provisional Mahayana schools abandoned the doctrine, taught by these schools, that living beings by their nature fall into five distinct groups, and instead sought to understand the wonderful insight expressed in the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life and the meditation on the five elements.

In addition, the lay believers, who were not learned enough to distinguish between Mahayana and Hinayana, provisional and true teachings, all gave their exclusive allegiance to the scholars of the Lotus Sutra and True Word teachings and contributed alms for their support. Thus the entire land of Japan, unlike India and China, was in effect populated by people whose capacity was fitted exclusively for the pure and perfect teaching. Most likely they resembled in capacity the living beings who for eight years on Eagle Peak listened to the preaching of the Lotus Sutra.

In this light it would appear then that the three Pure Land teachers of China had only the capacity to understand the provisional Mahayana teachings. But Hōnen understood neither the capacity fitted for the pure and perfect teaching, nor the pure and perfect teaching itself, nor that this is a land suited for the pure and perfect teaching. Instead he took the Nembutsu, a practice taught in the Meditation Sutra and similar sutras, which are among the provisional Mahayana sutras, and, following the commentaries written by the three Pure Land teachers of China,
who could not distinguish between provisional and true teachings, propagated it throughout this country of ours. To persons whose capacity fitted them for the true teaching he offered the provisional doctrines. He took a country suited for the pure and perfect teaching and made it a country of the provisional teachings. It was as though, to persons accustomed to the flavor of ghee, he offered mere curdled milk or butter. Great, in truth, were the errors he committed!

Background

According to the heading of this letter, Nichiren Daishonin wrote this work at Renge-ji temple in his home province of Awa in 1264, some fifty days before the so-called Komatsubara Persecution, and addressed it to a priest named Jōen-bō.

Jōen-bō appears to have been associated with Renge-ji temple. The Daishonin, in his Letter to the Priests of Seichō-ji, wrote, “On the twenty-eighth day of the fourth month in the fifth year of Kenchō [1253], I pointed out the errors of the various schools for the first time to a priest called Jōen-bō and to some of the people on the southern side of the image hall in Dōzen-bō’s quarters at Seichō-ji temple in Tōjō Village of Awa Province” (I, p. 651). Thus, Jōen-bō was witness to the Daishonin’s declaration of his teaching. And from this, we can imagine that he had a close relationship with Dōzen-bō, the Daishonin’s childhood teacher, and the other priests of Seichō-ji. It has also been suggested that Renge-ji, where the Daishonin wrote this letter in the ninth month of 1264 and two months later tried to convert Dōzen-bō, was a branch temple of Seichō-ji. While Jōken-bō and Gijō-bō, priests of Seichō-ji, had become the Daishonin’s disciples, Jōen-bō apparently had yet to do so, though from the contents of this letter he appears to have respected the Daishonin and his teaching.

In this writing, Nichiren Daishonin focuses his criticism of the Pure Land teaching on the contents of The Nembutsu Chosen above All, the central work of Hōnen, the founder of the Pure Land school in Japan. He attributes the slander of the Law inherent in the Pure Land teaching to the errors made by Hōnen in this treatise. He points to the falsehood of statements such as the one by the Chinese Pure Land teacher Shan-tao, cited in this treatise, that not one person in a thousand can be saved by teachings other than the Pure Land teaching, and Hōnen’s assertion that people should, in effect, “discard, close, ignore, and abandon” teachings other than the three Pure Land sutras, including the Lotus Sutra. Such claims, the Daishonin asserts, cause people to abandon their faith in the Lotus Sutra, and thus constitute the grave offense of slandering the Law. In terms of the actual effects of such slander, he points to reports concerning the deaths of leading priests and high-ranking lay practitioners of the Nembutsu teaching. According to these, a number of such individuals experienced agony to the point of losing their minds—exhibiting a “crazed and disordered” state of mind, under the Pure Land school’s own definition—in their final hours. He contrasts this with the state of mind of practitioners of the Lotus Sutra who have died, indicating that they met death in a state of “right mindfulness.” He also emphasizes that
the three Pure Land sutras fall into the category of provisional teachings that have no power to benefit people in the Latter Day of the Law.

Notes


2. This means that one fixes one's mind on Amida Buddha and thereby attains rebirth in his Pure Land.

3. This means that one who daily meditates on Amida Buddha retains a correct and undisturbed state of mind at the moment of death and thereby attains rebirth in Amida's Pure Land.

4. This means that at the moment of death, one whose state of mind is neutral, that is, neither characterized by good nor bad, is led by Amida Buddha to his Pure Land because of one's devotion to Amida Buddha in one's previous existence.

5. This means that an evil person who, distressed at the moment of death because of his evil deeds, loses his mind and becomes deranged, and then recites the name of Amida Buddha ten times or just one time, thereby attains rebirth in Amida's Pure Land.

6. The Meditation Sutra classifies those born in Amida's Pure Land into nine types according to their capacity and quality. Those of the lowest type, or of the lowest grade of rebirth, have committed the five cardinal sins and the ten evil acts, but at the moment of death were exhorted to invoke the name of Amida ten times and were reborn in his Pure Land.

7. *Commentary on the Meditation on the Buddha Infinite Life Sutra.*

8. Details about Shinkō are unknown. Namu refers to Namu-bō. For him and the other individuals, see Glossary.


12. The first thirteen types of meditation involve concentrating one's mind on the splendor of Amida's Pure Land, the features of Amida Buddha, and the bodhisattvas in this Pure Land. The other three types of meditation are directed at the image of Amida Buddha.

13. A reference to the white lotus flower.

14. The three types of meritorious acts are (1) filial piety, regard for elders, and observance of the ten good precepts; (2) revering the three treasures of the Buddha, his teachings, and the Buddhist Order, and observing the precepts; and (3) aspiring for enlightenment, reading and reciting the great vehicle sutras, and exhorting others to pursue the Buddha way.

15. *Commentary on the Meditation on the Buddha Infinite Life Sutra.* The "meditative good acts" refers to those that require a concentrated state of mind such as meditation on Amida, and the "unconcentrated good acts" refers to those that can be carried out in an unfocused state of mind.


17. The "non-Buddhist teachings" refers to those of India or Brahmanism.

18. The three schools of Hinayana teachings are the Dharma Analysis Treasury, Establishment of Truth, and Precepts schools. The three schools of provisional Mahayana teachings are the Dharma Characteristics, Three Treatises, and Flower Garland schools.

19. A reference to five natures (see Glossary).

20. An esoteric form of meditation intended to lead to the realization that self and environment are composed of the five elements of earth, water, fire, wind, and space; that the five parts of the body, namely, crown, face, chest, abdomen, and knees, are governed by the five syllables of the esoteric mantra, avavahakha; and that one's own life is ultimately one with the five Buddhas who are embodiments of the five aspects of Mahāvairochana Buddha's wisdom.